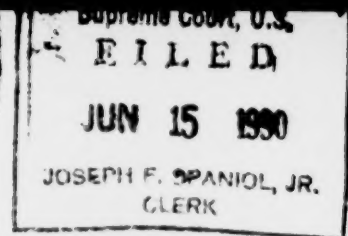


(2)  
No. 89-1787



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In The  
**Supreme Court of the United States**  
October Term, 1989

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NEBRASKA PUBLIC POWER DISTRICT,  
*Petitioner,*  
vs.

NUCOR CORPORATION,  
*Respondent.*

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Petition For Writ Of Certiorari  
To The United States Court Of Appeals  
For The Eighth Circuit

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BRIEF IN OPPOSITION TO  
PETITION FOR WRIT OF CERTIORARI

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Submitted by:

ROGER P. COX  
HARDING & OGBORN  
500 The Atrium  
1200 N Street  
P.O. Box 82028  
Lincoln, Nebraska 68501-2028  
(402) 475-6761

*Counsel of Record  
for Respondent  
Nucor Corporation*

---

COCKLE LAW BRIEF PRINTING CO., (800) 225-6964  
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## QUESTIONS PRESENTED FOR REVIEW\*

1. Whether the District Court and the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals properly determined that all requirements of the Johnson Act of 1934 (the Johnson Act), 28 U.S.C. § 1342, were not satisfied and the Act did not deprive the federal courts of otherwise proper subject matter jurisdiction over this breach of contract action based on the District Court's findings that:

(a) Nebraska Public Power District (NPPD) failed to afford Nucor Corporation (Nucor) reasonable notice and hearing, within the meaning of 28 U.S.C. § 1342(3) before adopting resolutions setting Nucor's electric rates; and

(b) The electric rates charged by NPPD to Nucor interfered with interstate commerce, within the meaning of 28 U.S.C. § 1342(2).

2. Whether the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals properly affirmed the District Court's judgment awarding Nucor \$4,403,546.70 for damages incurred as a result of NPPD's continuous breaches of the parties' power contract, based on the jury's determination that the electric rates charged by NPPD to Nucor were not fair, reasonable and nondiscriminatory for each and every year encompassed by the 1974-1986 time period.

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\* Nucor Corporation respectfully submits a revised statement of the Questions Presented for Review pursuant to S. Ct. R. 15.1 and 24.2 (1990).

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## STATUTES INVOLVED

Nucor acknowledges the question of federal court subject matter jurisdiction raised by NPPD in this case arises under the Johnson Act of 1934, 28 U.S.C. § 1342. However, Nucor does not agree with NPPD's argumentative assertion that the question of validity of the money judgment entered against NPPD in this breach of contract case is determinable by reference to NEB. REV. STAT. § 70-655 (Reissue 1986).

NPPD's statutory authorization to enter into power contracts is codified in NEB. REV. STAT. § 70-626 (Reissue 1986) and NPPD's amenability to suit for a breach of such a contract is established by NEB. REV. STAT. § 70-602 (Reissue 1986). These statutory provisions are set forth verbatim, at pages 1-3 of the Appendix, pursuant to S. Ct. R. 14(f) (1990).

## STATEMENT OF THE CASE

This breach of contract action was brought by Nucor, a Delaware corporation,<sup>1</sup> against NPPD, a public corporation and political subdivision of the State of Nebraska. Nebraska statutes permit NPPD to be sued in its corporate name. NEB. REV. STAT. § 70-602 (Reissue 1986). Jurisdiction of the United States District Court for the District of Nebraska was based on diversity of citizenship pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1332.

The parties' contractual relationship began on August 1, 1972, when their representatives executed a written power contract drafted by NPPD which is at the heart of this dispute. Nucor is NPPD's largest retail customer, as measured by electrical usage, and Nucor is the

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<sup>1</sup> Nucor Corporation has one subsidiary corporation, Nucor Yamato Steel Company. Nucor has no parent corporation.

only customer in the HTS-2 (Large Industrial Primary Power Service) customer class. The power contract included a rate review provision which required that rates designed and charged by NPPD pursuant to the contract "shall be sufficient, but only sufficient, to collect the expense and estimated net revenue requirements associated with [service to Nucor] and these rates shall be fair, reasonable and nondiscriminatory." The rate review provision also required NPPD to prepare "a study of the operating expenses and the estimated net revenue requirements for [service to Nucor]" at intervals not to exceed every two years (App. 4.)

In September of 1973, NPPD began furnishing electric service to Nucor's steel mill, located near Norfolk, Nebraska. Nucor initiated this breach of contract action in 1985, after discovering that NPPD had ignored the recommendation of its consultants and increased Nucor's 1982 electric rates by 15 percent, when NPPD's consultants had recommended a decrease of 3.9 percent. (App. 25.) The essence of Nucor's breach of contract claim is that NPPD failed to fulfill its contractual obligations to charge fair, reasonable and nondiscriminatory rates, and to perform a cost study every two years.<sup>2</sup> Nucor's primary contentions before the District Court and on appeal were that NPPD continuously breached the parties' power contract by (1) failing to properly allocate demand costs, (2) failing to regularly perform a fully-allocated cost of service study, (3) allocating solely to Nucor's rate

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<sup>2</sup> NPPD appears to suggest at page 5 of its Petition that its performance of a separate cost study for wholesale customers somehow satisfied the cost study requirement of the NPPD-Nucor retail power contract. However, NPPD's suggestion ignores the jury's specific finding in Special Interrogatory No. 8 that NPPD did not prepare the contractually-required study. (App. 6-7.)

certain costs associated with 230 kilovolt transmission facilities which served other NPPD customers as well as Nucor, (4) depriving Nucor of its full allotment of federal hydropower benefits obtained through the Western Area Power Administration (WAPA), and (5) using an incorrect production cost adjustment factor for Nucor.

### Course of Proceedings in the District Court

The evidence at trial established that a five-step rate-setting process is recognized as an industry standard in the electric utility industry<sup>3</sup> and that all five steps must be properly performed in order for rates to be fair, reasonable and nondiscriminatory. NPPD's approach to setting rates during the years at issue skipped the fourth step of the standard five-step rate-setting process by failing to allocate costs.

NPPD is a strong summer peaking utility and has historically experienced pronounced peaks in system demand during the summer months of June through September. Expert testimony at trial established that the twelve-month noncoincident peak (12 NCP) cost allocation approach used by NPPD was completely inappropriate for the NPPD electric system and that NPPD's approach to rate setting was so far removed from recognized industry standards that such approach could not

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<sup>3</sup> The five steps of the industry standard rate-setting process are as follows: (1) Determine system costs; (2) Functionalize system costs (among production costs, purchase power costs, transmission costs and distribution costs); (3) Classify system costs (among demand costs, energy costs and customer costs); (4) Allocate system costs to customer classes; and (5) Design rates based on allocated costs.



even properly be regarded as a "method" recognized in the utility industry. By contrast, expert testimony at trial established that the four-month coincident peak (4 CP) demand cost allocation methodology was the most appropriate rate-setting method for NPPD, given the characteristics of its electric system. Nucor offered this evidence to provide the trier of fact with a reasonable basis to (1) determine that NPPD had breached its power contract with Nucor, and (2) provide specific evidence of Nucor's individual damages.

The jury returned its verdict on May 6, 1987, finding that the rates established by NPPD were not fair, reasonable and nondiscriminatory for each of the years of 1974 through 1986. The jury also found Nucor had sustained total damages of \$7,492,340.00, which were proximately caused by NPPD's failure to set fair, reasonable and nondiscriminatory rates. In addition, the jury specifically found that NPPD had failed to perform the contractually-required study of the operating expenses and the estimated net revenue requirements of serving Nucor at intervals specified in the power contract. (App. 5-7.)

The District Court entered judgment on May 15, 1987 (App. 8.) Although the District Court's judgment awarded damages in the sum of \$4,403,546.70, the difference between the judgment and the jury's verdict was due solely to application of the statute of limitations and the District Court did not disturb any of the jury's specific findings. (App. 8-10.)

### **Disposition of the Jurisdictional Issue**

NPPD did not raise the issue of whether the Johnson Act of 1934 deprived the federal courts of otherwise proper subject matter jurisdiction over this action until March 22, 1988, well after the parties had submitted briefs to the Court of Appeals on the merits of the appeal

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and cross-appeal, less than three weeks before oral argument was initially scheduled to occur before the Court of Appeals and nearly three years after this litigation began. Following additional briefing, oral argument was had on both the merits and the jurisdictional issue before the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals on June 15, 1988. Thereafter, on June 30, 1988, the Court of Appeals entered an Order remanding "this breach of contract action" to the District Court with directions to certify specific findings concerning the jurisdictional issue. (App. 11-13.)

Following further discovery and a hearing on the jurisdictional issue, the District Court entered a Memorandum and Order on December 6, 1988, determining that the Johnson Act did not deprive the federal courts of subject matter jurisdiction over this action because "under either a due process test or the Nebraska statute [NEB. REV. STAT. § 84-1411 (Reissue 1987)], NPPD did not provide reasonable notice in this case . . . " and because NPPD's rate orders at issue interfered with interstate commerce. (App. 21, 23.) Because NPPD had multiple methods at its disposal for providing reasonable notice to Nucor, but failed to utilize any of those methods, the District Court concluded, "[u]nder the circumstances, the notice provided to Nucor cannot be said to have a reasonable certainty of resulting in actual notice [and] [i]n fact, it appears that the opposite may have been true." (App. 24.) The District Court also found NPPD did not provide Nucor with a hearing. (App. 25-26.) The District Court certified these findings to the Court of Appeals. (App. 26.)

A unanimous panel of the Court of Appeals affirmed the District Court's jurisdictional determination in its opinion of December 13, 1989. (App. 40, 49; 891 F.2d at 1346 and 1352.) Like the District Court, the Court of Appeals initially expressed "serious reservations" (App.

35-36 at n. 4) about the applicability of the Johnson Act to cases where rates are established by an entity such as NPPD, which is not subject to independent regulation.<sup>4</sup> However, because the evidence made it so clear that all four criteria of the Johnson Act were not satisfied in this case, the District Court and the Court of Appeals found it unnecessary to resolve the issue of the applicability of the Act. Instead, both courts held that two of the four prerequisites for invoking the Act's jurisdictional preclusion were not satisfied in this case.

In upholding the existence of federal subject matter jurisdiction, both the District Court and the Court of Appeals determined that NPPD failed to afford Nucor "reasonable notice and hearing" before adopting the challenged rate orders and that such rate orders interfered with interstate commerce, such that subsections (2) and

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<sup>4</sup> The Court of Appeals was justified in having "serious reservations" concerning the applicability of the Johnson Act because NPPD is not subject to any regulation by an independent regulatory body and is not a "public utility" within the meaning of 28 U.S.C. § 1342. See, *Municipal Electric Utilities, et al. v. Power Authority of the State of New York*, No. 80 Civ. 1141, slip op. (S.D.N.Y. 1981) ("One cannot escape the conclusion that Congress, in passing the Johnson Act did not foresee or intend this limited curtailment of federal jurisdiction to apply to a suit involving an entity such as PASNY, which is both a regulator and regulatee"). Cf. *Phillips Towing Service, Inc. v. Bushnell*, 719 F. Supp. 1428 (N.D. Ill. 1989) (reasoning the Johnson Act should be construed from the perspective of the Seventy-Third Congress in 1934, stating, "the modern meaning of 'public utility,' connoting a publicly owned utility, probably was not the one used by the Seventy-Third Congress"); and *City of Moultrie v. Burgess*, 90 S.E.2d 1 (Ga. 1955) ("the distinguishing characteristic of a public utility is the devotion of private property" to a public use) (emphasis added).

(3) of the Johnson Act were not satisfied. (App. 21, 23, 38-40, 49; 891 F.2d at 1346-1348, 1352.) Because NPPD has failed to apprise this Court of all of the jurisdictional facts relevant to the "notice and hearing" and "interference with interstate commerce" issues, it is necessary to set out these facts in some detail here.<sup>5</sup>

The rate determinations which constituted breaches of the power contract were made by resolutions adopted by NPPD at meetings of its Board of Directors. The only notice which NPPD provided of upcoming meetings of its Board of Directors was a single publication in *The Columbus Telegram* of a small classified advertisement approximately one week prior to each meeting. Because this skeletal, classified advertisement is at the center of issues relating to adequacy of notice in this case, specific facts are pertinent concerning such classified ads and the newspaper in which they were published.

*The Columbus Telegram* is headquartered in Columbus, Nebraska, which is the same community in which NPPD has its general office. Nucor's steel mill is located in Stanton County, Nebraska, approximately five miles north of Norfolk, Nebraska. The community of Norfolk is situated in Madison County and is approximately 45 miles north of Columbus, which is located in Platte County. (App. 16-17, 36-37; 891 F.2d at 1347-1348.)

NPPD provides service to approximately 100,000 retail customers in 87 of Nebraska's 93 counties. During

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<sup>5</sup> NPPD made no effort to argue to the Court of Appeals that the findings of fact by the District Court relevant to the jurisdictional issue were clearly erroneous. (App. 38; 891 F.2d at 1347.) Further, prior decisions of this Court establish that these findings of fact are unassailable here. See, e.g., *Bianti v. Finkel*, 495 U.S. 507, 100 S. Ct. 1287 (1980); *Anderson v. Abbott*, 321 U.S. 349, 64 S. Ct. 531 (1944); *Alabama Power Co. v. Ickes*, 302 U.S. 464, 58 S. Ct. 300 (1938).

the years encompassed by this litigation, 1974-1986, the total circulation of *The Columbus Telegram* varied between approximately 10,000 to 12,000 readers. *The Columbus Telegram's* coverage area was limited primarily to Platte County and did not include either the site of Nucor's steel mill or the residences of its primary officers in Norfolk.

*The Columbus Telegram* notices did not reach Nucor or the overwhelming majority of NPPD's retail customers, who reside in counties other than Platte County. NPPD's own Public Affairs Manager described *The Columbus Telegram* in testimony as a "small market newspaper." Neither Nucor nor its officers subscribed to *The Columbus Telegram* and, in fact, the newspaper had only one subscriber in all of Stanton County, where Nucor's steel mill is located. (App. 17, 37; 891 F.2d at 1347.) A sample of a typical notice of NPPD Board meetings published in *The Columbus Telegram* is set forth below:

#### LEGAL NOTICE

Regular meeting of the Board of Directors of Nebraska Public Power District, which meeting will be open to the public will be held Thursday, November 18, 1982 beginning at 2:00 p.m. at the Columbus General Office, Columbus, Nebraska, and reconvening on Friday, November 19, 1982 at a time to be announced prior to adjournment on November 18th. An agenda for such meeting kept continuously current is available for public inspection during business hours at the office of the Assistant Secretary of the District at the Columbus General Office.

NEBRASKA PUBLIC  
POWER DISTRICT

Additional facts relevant to the notice issue were succinctly summarized by the Court of Appeals as follows:

. . . Nucor officials testified that Nucor had never received advance notice of rate increases, and had no knowledge of their right to appear at hearings to inquire about rate increases.

In certain situations, additional notice of Board meetings and rate changes was given to Nebraska Power customers. Every two years, Nebraska Power conducted a wholesale rate study and notified by mail all 97 wholesale customers of their right to request a hearing on rate changes. Nebraska Power has held five or six rate hearings since 1970, and between 50 and 175 people have attended each meeting. Also, Nebraska Power routinely has given notice of proposed rate action to "retail towns," which sell electricity to their residents, pursuant to an agreement with the towns. In addition, Nebraska Power has given notice of proposed rate increases to approximately 200 retail towns as an informational courtesy.

Nebraska Power mailed monthly billing statements to all customers but has never included notices of meetings with these mailings. Nebraska Power has, however, occasionally included advertising inserts with the billing statements. Advertisements are also routinely placed in many Nebraska newspapers.

(App. 37; 891 F.2d at 1347.)

Based on the foregoing undisputed facts, the Court of Appeals affirmed the District Court's determination that NPPD had failed to provide Nucor with reasonable notice prior to enacting the challenged rate orders:

The evidence fully supports the district court's finding that the notice given Nucor did not have a reasonable certainty of giving Nucor actual notice. The publication in *The Columbus Telegram*, a newspaper with very limited



circulation in the city of Norfolk, did not fulfill Nebraska Power's obligation. The notice did not state that ratemaking was the purpose of the board meetings, but stated little more than that an agenda was available at the general office. Further, Nebraska Power regularly performed cost analyses for wholesale rates and based Nucor's yearly rate increases, in part, on these analyses. The wholesale customers were given notice of the rate changes based on the analyses while Nucor, a retail customer, was not. The district court did not err in its determination that reasonable notice was lacking here.

(App. 39; 891 F.2d at 1348.)

The District Court also determined NPPD's rate orders interfered with interstate commerce within the meaning of subsection (2) of the Johnson Act. (App. 21.) The evidence developed by Nucor at trial established that NPPD had deprived Nucor of the full benefits of federal WAPA power to which Nucor was entitled and Nucor's evidence at the supplemental hearing before the District Court on the jurisdictional issue established the magnitude of that deprivation.

Testimony at the supplemental hearing conclusively established NPPD's rate determinations for Nucor resulted in approximately \$7 million in overcharges to Nucor since 1972 due to NPPD's failure to provide Nucor with its proper share of federal WAPA power benefits. The undisputed evidence at the supplemental hearing also established that Nucor is a multi-state corporation selling its goods in interstate commerce, the \$7 million WAPA deprivation had an impact on the costing of Nucor's goods for sale to other entities in many states and the resulting increase in costs was reflected in the price of the goods sold in interstate commerce. Under these circumstances, the Court of Appeals affirmed the

District Court's determination that the challenged rate orders interfered with interstate commerce:

. . . We are satisfied . . . that the district court correctly determined that another criterion is not met here either. The Johnson Act requires that the rate order not interfere with interstate commerce. . . . We recognize the tentative nature of the court's comments, but nevertheless conclude that the court did not err. There was evidence that Nebraska Power wrongfully deprived Nucor of Western Area Power Administration benefits and that this resulted in approximately \$7 million in overcharges to Nucor. Nucor presented testimony that this affected the cost of Nucor's goods for sale in interstate commerce. Considering this and other factors identified by the district court, we believe that the court did not err in assessing the impact on interstate commerce.

(App. 39-40; 891 F.2d at 1348.)

Not until the continuation of the appeal following remand did NPPD contend, for the first time, that abstention under *Burford v. Sun Oil Co.*, 319 U.S. 315, 63 S. Ct. 1098 (1943) might be appropriate in this case. The Court of Appeals rejected this contention because, unlike the situation in *Burford*, Nucor's challenges in this case were not directed at the decisions of an independent regulatory commission, and there is no centralized state scheme in place for judicial review of electric rates in Nebraska. The Court of Appeals also expressly disapproved NPPD's raising of an abstention argument at such a late stage of the proceedings, stating "the fact that Nebraska Power has delayed raising the abstention issue until after a full trial on the merits shows a lack of respect for the considerations of comity underlying *Burford*." (App. 40; 891 F.2d at 1348.)



### Disposition of Appeal on the Merits

In the Court of Appeals' opinion of December 13, 1989, the majority of the three-judge panel affirmed the judgment of the District Court on the merits. The majority opinion examined the Complaint, in which Nucor framed its cause of action as one for breach of contract based primarily upon NPPD's breach of the rate review provision of the contract. The majority opinion also found it significant that the case was submitted to the jury as a breach of contract claim. Given these factors, the majority opinion concluded that this action was properly tried and resolved as a breach of contract case, reasoning that "[t]he nature of this action must be determined by the pleadings and the issues submitted to the jury." (App. 41-42; 891 F.2d at 1349.)<sup>6</sup>

The majority opinion affirmed the District Court's construction of Nebraska law, which recognized Nucor's entitlement to recover money damages from NPPD. The majority opinion accurately summarizes Nucor's position on the merits:

In support of its arguments, Nebraska Power identifies certain Nebraska Supreme Court decisions, particularly *McGinley v. Wheat Belt Public Power District*, 214 Neb. 178, 332 N.W.2d 915 (1983) . . . *McGinley*, Nebraska Power argues, stands for the proposition that the only remedy available upon review is for a court to remand the case to the board of directors to exercise its ratemaking function. . . .

We believe Nebraska Power's reliance on *McGinley* is misplaced. The *McGinley* court held that 'the proper action to take in a case of this

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<sup>6</sup> A separate panel of the Court of Appeals also previously recognized Nucor's action as a "breach of contract action." (App. 11.)

nature, *absent specific evidence of individual damages*, is to require the board of directors . . . to set a proper rate.' *McGinley*, 214 Neb. at 189, 332 N.W.2d at 921 (emphasis added). This suggests that a court presented with evidence of individual damages, as was the court below, is empowered to award monetary damages rather than remanding to the board of directors. In addition, an underlying assumption of Nebraska Power's argument is that Nucor's action is based on allegedly discriminatory rates, as was the case in *McGinley*. *This mischaracterizes the nature of the suit before us, which is a claim to recover overcharges based on breach of contract. . . .*

. . . .

The dissent argues that we accept Nucor's cost allocation method as the only fair, reasonable and nondiscriminatory method. This mischaracterizes our holding. We simply hold that a jury could properly find, based upon evidence of Nebraska Power's treatment of several items of cost allocation, outlined above, that the particular rate charged was not fair, reasonable, and nondiscriminatory, and, upon being presented with specific evidence of individual damages, could properly determine the amount of past overcharges.

(App. 42-44; 891 F.2d at 1349-1350, and n. 5) (former emphasis in original, latter emphasis added).

## ARGUMENT

1. NPPD's Petition for Writ of Certiorari does not present any special and important reasons to support a grant of certiorari.

Pursuant to S. Ct. R. 10.1 (1990), the primary considerations relied upon by this Court in determining whether to grant review on Writ of Certiorari are:

A review on writ of certiorari is not a matter of right, but of judicial discretion. A petition for writ of certiorari will be granted only when there are special and important reasons therefor. The following, while neither controlling nor fully measuring the Court's discretion, indicate the character of reasons that will be considered.

(a) When a United States court of appeals has rendered a decision in conflict with the decision of another United States court of appeals on the same matter; or has decided a federal question in a way in conflict with a state court of last resort; or has so far departed from the accepted and the usual course of judicial proceedings, or sanctioned such a departure by a lower court, as to call for an exercise of this Court's power of supervision.

....

(c) When a state or a United States court of appeals has decided an important question of federal law which has not been, but should be, settled by this Court, or has decided a federal question in a way that conflicts with applicable decisions of this Court.

No special and important reasons exist in this case to support the exercise of discretionary review. The purpose of the Johnson Act is "to compel resort to the State courts, *except where the ratemaking authority had, in effect denied due process of law by failing or refusing to accord 'reasonable notice and hearing.'*" *United Gas Corp. v. City of Monroe*, 46 F. Supp. 45, 46 (W.D. La. 1942) (emphasis added). The *United Gas Corp.* court's conclusion is fully supported by the legislative history of the Johnson Act. In discussion on the Senate floor as to the meaning of the words "reasonable notice and hearing" in the original version of the Johnson Act, Senator Johnson (the sponsor of the Act) stated:

If the regulatory body meets without notice, without hearings, and enacts a particular set of rates for a public utility, of course, a situation is created which no one wants in the first place, and that the law will not permit in the second place.

78 CONG. REC. 1920 (1934).

Consistent with Congressional intent and uniform and long-standing federal court precedent which has existed for almost as long as the Johnson Act, the District Court and the Court of Appeals determined that a ratepayer is entitled to "reasonable notice and hearing" sufficient to satisfy the minimum standards of procedural due process before a ratemaking political subdivision may invoke the Act to defeat otherwise proper federal subject matter jurisdiction.<sup>7</sup> Moreover the standard relied upon by the District Court in determining the challenged rate orders interfered with interstate commerce within the meaning of 28 U.S.C. § 1342(2), which determination was affirmed by the Court of Appeals, is the very standard that NPPD asserts at page 18 of its Petition.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, the Johnson Act jurisdictional issues raised by NPPD in its Petition do not present the type of "special and important reasons" that this Court requires to support a grant of certiorari. *See*, S. Ct. R. 10.1 (1990).

NPPD also suggests that certiorari should be granted on the basis of its contention that this case involves important public interests relating to state regulation of public utilities. NPPD's contention in this regard is also without merit. Nucor does not dispute that states have a significant interest in "regulation" of public utilities. However, this breach of contract case has nothing whatsoever to do with "regulation" of NPPD.

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<sup>7</sup> *See*, § 1(a), *infra* at p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> *See*, § 1(b), *infra* at p. 25.

NPPD voluntarily entered into the August 1, 1972 power contract. The Nebraska Legislature empowered NPPD to enter into such contracts:

[A] district may . . . enter into *any kind of contract* or arrangement with any person, firm [or] corporation . . . for the generation, distribution, transmission, *sale*, or purchase of *electrical energy* . . . for lighting, power, heating, and any and every other useful purpose whatsoever, and for any and every service involving, employing, or in any manner pertaining to the use of electrical energy, by whatever means generated or distributed. . . .

NEB. REV. STAT. § 70-626 (Reissue 1986) (emphasis added). See also, *City of O'Neill v. Consumers Public Power Dist.*, 179 Neb. 773, 140 N.W.2d 644 (1966) (interpreting § 70-626 as granting to public power districts the "specific power . . . to enter into any kind of contract . . . for the sale of electrical energy").

Nebraska courts have long recognized that governmental entities are bound by their contracts to the same extent as individuals. *Stoller v. State of Nebraska*, 171 Neb. 93, 105 N.W.2d 852 (1960); *In re Appeal Roadmix Const. Corp.*, 143 Neb. 425, 9 N.W.2d 741 (1943). The Nucor-NPPD contract dispute is, therefore, "governed by contract principles applicable generally to the contracts of private parties." *Zepp v. Mayor and Council of Athens*, 348 S.E.2d 673, 676 (Ga. 1986) ("[w]here a city sells water to a customer pursuant to a voluntary contract, that contract is subject to review by the courts in the same manner as any other private contract"), citing, *Jonesboro v. Clayton County Water Auth.*, 222 S.E.2d 76 (Ga. 1975) (holding county water authority was bound to charge rates in conformity with written contracts with a ratepayer). See also, Antieau, *Independent Local Government Entities*, § 30J.07.

NPPD is not subject to independent regulation. Nucor's breach of contract action against NPPD is permitted by Nebraska law and fully consistent with Nebraska public policy. (App. 1-3.) Because this case involves a simple contract dispute governed by the same rules that govern contracts between private individuals, no public interest in "regulation" of public utilities is involved.

- (a) **The Court of Appeals properly applied the procedural due process test in determining that NPPD had not accorded Nucor "reasonable notice" within the meaning of 28 U.S.C. § 1342(3).**

In an imaginative effort to render the language of 28 U.S.C. § 1342(3) meaningless, NPPD apparently concedes that the reasonable notice and hearing language of the Johnson Act equates to a due process standard, but argues that the legislative character of ratemaking completely eliminates § 1342(3)'s reasonable notice and hearing requirements. The United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit soundly rejected precisely such an argument in *City of Meridian v. Mississippi Valley Gas Co.*, 214 F.2d 527 (5th Cir. 1954). There, a municipal ratemaker asserted that the notice and hearing to be afforded in the exercise of its legislative function of fixing rates should be left to its discretion as the body exercising the legislative power and the "reasonable notice and hearing" requirement of the Johnson Act was therefore satisfied. The Fifth Circuit forcefully disagreed with the rate-maker's contention:

. . . [I]n arguing that, in fixing rates, the city is exercising legislative power and does not have to give a real notice and afford a real hearing before making the order, appellant completely misapprehends the question this appeal presents. . . . [T]he city makes an argument which,



*if accepted and followed as to the promise of the Johnson Act for notice and hearing, would keep it to the ear while it breaks it to the hope. . . .*

*No case has been cited to us, we have found none, we believe none can be found, which supports the view thus announced, that it is not for the court whose jurisdiction is invoked to determine whether reasonable notice and hearing, as provided in the Act, were afforded, but it is for the defendant to determine this for itself and for the plaintiff to be bound by that determination.*

*Such a view would nullify the purpose of Congress to channel normal rate litigation into the State Courts while leaving Federal Courts free in the exercise of their equity powers to relieve against arbitrary action such as the district judge, on evidence supporting his finding, found had occurred in this case.*

*Id.* at 526 (emphasis added).

NPPD has confused the issue of whether it provided "reasonable notice and hearing" sufficient to satisfy 28 U.S.C. § 1342(3) with the issue of what process is due to ratepayers in conjunction with rate setting. However, the issue is not whether traditional procedural due process notice and hearing requirements must be complied with to enact a valid rate. Rather, the issue is whether procedural due process notice and hearing requirements must be satisfied to trigger the applicability of the Johnson Act. The court's reasoning in *Georgia Continental Telephone Co. v. Georgia Public Service Comm.*, 8 F. Supp. 434 (N.D. Ga. 1934), reveals the fatal flaw in NPPD's assertions to this Court.

In *Georgia Continental Telephone Co.*, the court rejected an argument almost identical to that raised by NPPD here. There, the plaintiff telephone company sought to enjoin as confiscatory a rate order of a state public service commission, alleging the order was invalid because the commission considered "evidence in their files not a part

of the records made before them" and such information was not disclosed to the telephone company. *Id.* at 435-436. The commission's defense was that, in fixing future rates, it exercised a legislative function and was therefore not bound to grant any hearing. The court soundly rejected the commission's contention and held the Johnson Act did not apply to defeat federal jurisdiction:

. . . A hearing in which the parties to be affected are not allowed to know what evidence is to be considered against them so that they cannot contradict or explain it is not reasonable. [Citations omitted.] *It is no answer that the state court has held that under the Georgia law the Commission in fixing a future rate acts legislatively and like a Legislature is not bound to grant any hearing, and therefore may, if of mere grace, it grants a hearing, consider evidence in its files not introduced. [Citations omitted.] We gravely doubt that a subordinate legislative agency may consistently with due process fix rates without a hearing. But that is not the question here. Irrespective of the power to do so, the Johnson Act retains federal jurisdiction when a reasonable hearing was not in fact had. . . .*

*Id.* at 436 (emphasis added).

The Court of Appeals' reliance on the due process standard in reaching its determination that NPPD failed to provide Nucor "reasonable notice" and thereby failed to satisfy 28 U.S.C. § 1342(3) (App. 38-39; 891 F.2d at 1346-1348) is wholly consistent with the decisions in *City of Meridian, supra*, and *Georgia Continental Co., supra*, as well as its own prior decision in *Hanna Mining Co. v. Minnesota Power & Light Co.*, 739 F.2d 1368 (8th Cir. 1984) (court reviewed record on the merits in action brought by ratepayer and determined that rate order of the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission "was made after reasonable notice and hearing"). See also, *General Investment &*



*Service Corp. v. Wichita Water Co.*, 236 F.2d 464 (10th Cir. 1956) ("The purpose of hearing following notice is to give an interested party an opportunity to present evidence and to have findings of fact based thereon . . . [and] the absence of such opportunities does not constitute a fair hearing 'essential to due process.' No doubt Congress had this in mind when it passed the Johnson Act") *Kansas-Nebraska v. City of St. Edward*, 134 F. Supp. 809, 822 (D. Neb. 1955) ("What the Johnson Act requires is the giving of such notice and the allowance of such hearing as are adequate to meet the minimum standards of due process"); *United Gas Corp. v. City of Monroe*, *supra*; *Mississippi Power Co. v. City of Aberdeen*, 11 F. Supp. 951, 953 (N.D. Miss. 1935); and *Mississippi Power & Light Co. v. City of Jackson*, 9 F. Supp. 564 (S.D. Miss. 1935).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> At page 20 of its Petition, NPPD attempts to elevate broadly-worded *dicta* in *Tennyson v. Gas Service Co.*, 506 F.2d 1135, 1141 (10th Cir. 1974), to the level of a holding. Because the plaintiffs in *Tennyson* had not adduced any evidence at trial that the late charges which were challenged in that case were not made after reasonable notice and hearing at the state administrative level, *Tennyson* is certainly not authority that 28 U.S.C. § 1342(3) is meaningless where the aggrieved party is ratepayer. *Tennyson* involved a challenge to the authority of the ratemaking body to enact the challenged rate, rather than a challenge to the reasonableness of the rate as is the case here. Significantly, the *Tennyson* court affirmed the district court's reliance on *General Investment & Service Corp. v. Wichita Water Co.*, *supra*, in dismissing the case. *Tennyson*, 506 F.2d at 1137. The *General Investment* court emphasized this critical distinction in recognizing that where the challenge goes to the reasonableness of the rate, "reasonable notice and hearing" are required before the Johnson Act can be invoked to defeat federal subject matter jurisdiction, but where the challenge goes to the power to enact the rate "[t]hat is a legal question which can be presented in court without the administrative hearing contemplated by § 1342(3)." *General Investment*, 236 F.2d at 467-468.

This Court has consistently recognized the well-established duty of the courts to give effect, whenever possible, to every clause and word of a statute. *Mountain States Telephone & Telegraph Co. v. Pueblo of Santa Ana*, 472 U.S. 237, 249, 105 S. Ct. 2586, 2594 (1985); *Reiter v. Sonotone Corp.*, 442 U.S. 330, 99 S. Ct. 2326 (1979); and *United States v. Menasch*, 348 U.S. 528, 538-539, 75 S. Ct. 513, 519-520 (1955).

Ignoring the clear and unambiguous language of 28 U.S.C. § 1342(3) and the basic rules of statutory construction, NPPD has petitioned for a Writ of Certiorari to seek a judicial amendment of subsection (3) of 28 U.S.C. § 1342, which would nullify that subsection's "reasonable notice and hearing" requirement whenever the aggrieved party happens to be a ratepayer, rather than a utility.

The legislative history of the Act is devoid of any indication that Congress intended to apply a different "reasonable notice and hearing" standard where the aggrieved party challenging a rate order happens to be a ratepayer rather than a utility. By enacting the plain and unqualified language of subsection (3) of the Johnson Act, Congress clearly intended that federal jurisdiction should not be disturbed, unless an aggrieved party was afforded "reasonable notice and hearing" prior to the adoption of a challenged rate order, regardless of whether that aggrieved party is a ratepayer or a utility.

None of the procedural due process cases cited by NPPD lend any credence to NPPD's attempt to emasculate § 1342(3). See, NPPD's Petition at 20, citing, *Holt v. Yonce*, 370 F. Supp. 374 (D.S.C. 1973), *aff'd*, 415 U.S. 969, 94 S. Ct. 1553 (1974); *Sellers v. Iowa Power & Light Co.*, 372 F. Supp. 1169 (S.D. Ia. 1974); *Georgia Power Project v. Georgia Power Co.*, 409 F. Supp. 332 (N.D. Ga. 1975); and *Consolidated Aluminum Corp. v. T.V.A.*, 462 F. Supp. 464 (M.D. Tenn. 1978). None of these four cases are Johnson Act

cases, and, accordingly, they are irrelevant to the jurisdictional issues in this case.<sup>10</sup>

Further, in all four of these cases, the courts' holdings that the ratepayer plaintiffs were not entitled to procedural due process were based on determinations that ratepayers did not have a constitutionally-protected property interest in their electric rates under applicable state law. By contrast, the Nebraska Supreme Court has held that Nebraska ratepayers have a federal constitutionally-protected property entitlement to receive a fair and reasonable utility rate. *State, ex rel., Spire v. Northwestern Bell Tel. Co.*, 233 Neb. 262, 283, 445 N.W.2d 284, 297-298 (1989) ("a ratepayer's right to a fair and reasonable rate, a right which has emerged from the decisions of this court, is properly classified as a 'property' entitlement protected by the due process clauses of the U.S. and Nebraska Constitutions").

NPPD's contention that subsection (3) of the Johnson Act is meaningless directly conflicts with prior precedent of this Court. See, *Petroleum Exploration v. Public Service Comm.*, 304 U.S. 209, 214, 58 S. Ct. 834, 837 (1938) ("[t]he Johnson Act does not apply here because the order complained of . . . was entered without notice or hearing"). Therefore, the Court of Appeals' decision upholding the

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<sup>10</sup> *Holt, Sellers* and *Georgia Power* are also distinguishable on the following bases: (a) Each involved an interim or emergency rate increase rather than a permanent rate increase, (b) each involved a statutory protection to ratepayers in the form of a bond, undertaking or refund obligation if the increased rate was not ultimately approved, and (c) none of the ratepayers had written contracts with the utilities. In *Consolidated Aluminum*, the "[P]laintiff had notice of every stage in the process and availed itself of its opportunity to participate." 462 F. Supp. at 476. Unlike the power contract involved in *Consolidated Aluminum*, Nucor's contract grants it specific rights in the manner in which its electric rate is to be adjusted.

existence of federal subject matter jurisdiction in this case does not raise questions of federal law which have not been, but should be, settled by this Court. *See*, S. Ct. R. 10.1 (1990).

NPPD is asking this Court to grant certiorari and to determine on the merits that an obscure classified ad in a small market newspaper constitutes "reasonable notice," within the meaning of § 1342(3), even though NPPD knew such notice could not possibly reach more than a small fraction of its retail customers. NPPD's position is in direct conflict with this Court's holding in the seminal case of *Mullane v. Central Hanover Bank & Trust Co.*, 339 U.S. 306, 70 S. Ct. 652 (1950):

*[W]hen notice is a person's due, process which is a mere gesture is not due process. The means employed must be such as one desirous of actually informing the absentee might reasonably adopt to accomplish it. . . .*

*. . . It is not an accident that the greater number of cases reaching this Court on the question of adequacy of notice have been concerned with actions founded on process constructively served through local newspapers. Chance alone brings to the attention of even a local resident an advertisement in small type inserted in the back pages of a newspaper, and if he makes his home outside the area of the newspaper's normal circulation the odds that the information will never reach him are large indeed. The chance of actual notice is further reduced when as here, the notice required does not even name those whose attention it is supposed to attract, and does not inform acquaintances who might call it to attention.*

*Id.* at 314-315, 70 S. Ct. at 657-658 (emphasis added) (citations omitted). *See also*, *Tulsa Professional Collection Services, Inc. v. Pope*, 485 U.S. 478, 108 S. Ct. 1340 (1988)

(reaffirming *Mullane* notice requirements for satisfying due process standard).

In a final, desperate attempt to persuade this Court that the Johnson Act "reasonable notice and hearing" issue is the type of issue warranting the granting of a Writ of Certiorari, NPPD attempts to manufacture a conflict which simply does not exist between the Court of Appeals' decision in this case and the Nebraska Supreme Court's holding in *State, ex rel., Spire v. Northwestern Bell Telephone Co.*, *supra*. The *Northwestern Bell Telephone Co.* court did not address the standards governing sufficiency of "reasonable notice and hearing" under the Johnson Act as no Johnson Act issues can ever arise in *state* court because the Act is a limited curtailment of *federal* jurisdiction.<sup>11</sup> Nor did the *Northwestern Bell Telephone Co.* case involve any question concerning the appropriate interpretation of the Nebraska Public Meetings Law's requirement that "[e]ach public body shall give reasonable advance publicized notice of the time and place of each meeting [and] such notice shall be transmitted . . . to the public." NEB. REV. STAT. § 84-1411 (Reissue 1987).

In its filings and arguments in the District Court and the Court of Appeals concerning subject matter jurisdiction, NPPD effectively conceded it must, at a minimum, satisfy the notice requirements of NEB. REV. STAT. § 84-1411 (Reissue 1987) in order to satisfy the notice requirements of 28 U.S.C. § 1342(3). Even if NPPD's obligations to provide notice were so limited, which Nucor vigorously disputes, the District Court's specific holding that NPPD failed to comply with § 84-1411 (App. 23)

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<sup>11</sup> See, *Georgia Continental Telephone Co. v. Georgia Public Service Comm.*, 8 F. Supp. 434 (N.D. Ga. 1934) (state court determination of state law issue has no bearing on whether 28 U.S.C. § 1342(3) is satisfied).



provides an independent state law ground which fully supports the holding that NPPD has failed to provide "reasonable notice and hearing" within the meaning of the Johnson Act.

In the absence of Nebraska decisional authority interpreting the notice requirements of § 84-1411, the District Court properly sought guidance from Nebraska Supreme Court decisions considering the reasonableness of notice in other contexts. (App. 23.) *See, Gruenewald v. Waara*, 229 Neb. 619, 624, 428 N.W.2d 210, 214-215 (1988). The District Court's finding that NPPD did not comply with the notice requirements of § 84-1411 prior to setting the challenged electric rates is based on a reasonable interpretation of state law which fully supports the holding that NPPD has failed to provide "reasonable notice and hearing" within the meaning of § 1342(3). Under this Court's own standards, this state law determination by the District Court is entitled to great, if not controlling weight. *See, e.g., Butner v. United States*, 440 U.S. 48, 99 S. Ct. 914 (1978); *Bishop v. Wood*, 426 U.S. 341, 96 S. Ct. 2074 (1976); and *Bernhardt v. Polygraphic Co. of America*, 350 U.S. 198, 76 S. Ct. 273 (1956) (where federal judge making findings in diversity case as to Vermont law was from the Vermont bar, the Court determined to give special weight to his statement of what Vermont law was).<sup>12</sup>

- (b) **The Court of Appeals' affirmance of the District Court's finding that the challenged rate orders interfered with interstate commerce is consistent with the construction placed upon 28 U.S.C. § 1342(2) by other federal courts.**

In its Petition, NPPD quibbles over the Court of Appeals' phrasing of its conclusion that the rate orders

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<sup>12</sup> The Honorable Lyle E. Strom, Chief Judge for the District of Nebraska, who presided over the trial of this action, is a member of the Nebraska bar.

challenged by Nucor interfered with interstate commerce within the meaning of 28 U.S.C. § 1342(2) and NPPD suggests that the Court of Appeals applied an improper standard for determining whether such rate orders interfered with interstate commerce. NPPD's Petition at p. 18. However, a review of the District Court's Memorandum and Order of December 6, 1988 (App. 21), wherein the District Court made the initial determination that the challenged rate orders interfered with interstate commerce, establishes that both the District Court and the Court of Appeals applied the appropriate standard to conclude that the requirements of § 1342(2) were not satisfied. (App. 21, 39-40; 891 F.2d at 1348.)

In reaching its determination that the challenged rate orders interfered with interstate commerce within the meaning of § 1342(2), the District Court properly applied the standard set forth in *Kalinsky v. Long Island Lighting Co.*, 484 F. Supp. 176, 178 (E.D.N.Y. 1980):

Of course, a contact or effect on interstate commerce does not constitute an interference unless it is directly burdensome on interstate traffic.

(App. 21.)

The District Court's findings of fact, which were adopted by the Court of Appeals, established that NPPD wrongfully deprived Nucor of federal WAPA power benefits to which Nucor was entitled and established that such deprivation was much more than the slight incursion on interstate commerce NPPD suggests, resulting as it did in approximately \$7 million in overcharges to Nucor. (App. 21, 39-40; 891 F.2d at 1348.) Nucor presented un rebutted testimony that this \$7 million in overcharges affected the cost of Nucor's goods for sale in interstate commerce and the resulting increase in Nucor's costs was reflected in the price of the goods sold. Given these undisputed facts, the Court of Appeals quite properly affirmed the District Court's finding that the challenged

rate orders interfered with interstate commerce within the meaning of § 1342(2). (App. 34, 39-40; 891 F.2d at 1346, 1348.)

**2. The state law issue of Nucor's entitlement to recover damages from NPPD does not justify the exercise of discretionary review by this Court.**

The only other issue that NPPD has raised in its Petition as an asserted basis for certiorari is a challenge to Nucor's ability to recover damages for electric rate overcharges resulting from NPPD's breaches of its power contract with Nucor. In support of this contention, NPPD again resurrects its "legislative ratemaking" contentions and cites several of this Court's cases and several Nebraska Supreme Court cases for the proposition that rate setting is a legislative act. NPPD's Petition is devoid of any explanation concerning how this general proposition operates to make meaningless the very power contract between Nucor and NPPD that NPPD drafted and insisted upon.<sup>13</sup>

NPPD's contentions in this regard are essentially that the District Court and the majority of the decisional panel of the Court of Appeals erred in determining that

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<sup>13</sup> Nor do the federal RICO cases referenced by NPPD at pages 26-28 of its Petition shed any light on NPPD's contention that its power contract with Nucor can be treated as if it does not exist. *Carr v. The Southern Co.*, 731 F. Supp. 1067 (S.D. Ga. 1990), *County of Suffolk v. Long Island Lighting Co.*, 710 F. Supp. 1387 (E.D.N.Y. 1989) and *M.R. Taffet v. The Southern Co.*, No. 89V-712N (M.D. Ala. January 5, 1990) did not involve ratepayer suits to recover overcharge damages for breach of a valid, written power contract by the offending utility. None of the courts in these cases purported to interpret state law, much less Nebraska law. Thus, these RICO cases are irrelevant to the state law issue that NPPD seeks to raise here.



Nebraska law permits a ratepayer to recover overcharge damages from a public power district for breach of contract. However, because the District Court placed a reasonable construction on local Nebraska law in its interpretation of *McGinley v. Wheat Belt Power Dist.*, 214 Neb. 178, 332 N.W.2d 915 (1983) and other Nebraska cases, the Court of Appeals' affirmance of that reasonable construction was wholly consistent with well-established Eighth Circuit precedent. *See, e.g., Giove v. Stanko*, 882 F.2d 1316 (8th Cir. 1989) (interpretation of state law by trial court sitting in Nebraska held entitled to substantial deference); *E. Ritter & Co. v. Dept. of the Army Corps of Engineers*, 874 F.2d 1236 (8th Cir. 1989); *Camp v. Commonwealth Land Title Ins. Co.*, 787 F.2d 1258 (8th Cir. 1986); and *Nebraska Public Power Dist. v. Austin Power, Inc.*, 773 F.2d 960 (8th Cir. 1985) ("absent direct Nebraska authority, we give great weight to the district court's interpretation of local law").

Significantly, this Court has consistently taken the position that it will not engage in an independent examination of a state law issue, where a district court's interpretation of state law is tenable and such interpretation is subsequently accepted by a court of appeals. *See, e.g., Bowen v. Massachusetts*, 487 U.S. 879, 908, 108 S. Ct. 2722, 2739 (1988) ("We have a settled and firm policy of deferring to regional courts of appeals in matters that involve the construction of state law"); *Pembaur v. City of Cincinnati*, 475 U.S. 469, 485, 106 S. Ct. 1292, 1301 (1986) (Court indicating it might be inclined to reach a different result had it addressed the state law issue in the first instance, but deferring to the Sixth Circuit's interpretation of Ohio law stating, "[w]e generally accord great deference to the interpretation and application of state law by the courts of appeals"); *Daniels v. Williams*, 474 U.S. 327, 341-342, 106

S. Ct. 662, 680 (1986) (Stevens, J., concurring in the judgments) (rejecting inmate's contention that he did not have a state law remedy for the claimed negligence under Virginia law, because "the Fourth Circuit found to the contrary, and it is our settled practice to defer to the Court of Appeals on questions of state law"); *Butner v. United States*, 440 U.S. 48, 99 S. Ct. 914 (1978) ("The federal judges who deal regularly with questions of state law in their respective districts and circuits are in a better position than we to determine how local courts would dispose of comparable issues"); and *Bishop v. Wood*, 426 U.S. 341, 96 S. Ct. 2074 (1976) (Court refusing to independently examine state law issue in holding police officer had no claim to property interest in employment, even though the Court had previously imposed a contrary interpretation on a similarly-worded federal statute).

In *Bishop*, this Court rejected the petitioner's invitation to the Court to ignore the construction placed on state law by a federal district court and by the Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit, stating:

The District Court's reading of the ordinance is tenable; it derives some support from a decision of the North Carolina Supreme Court . . . ; and it was accepted by the Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit. *These reasons are sufficient to foreclose our independent examination of the state-law issue.*

426 U.S. at 347, 96 S. Ct. at 2079 (emphasis added).

The reasoning of this Court in *Bishop* is readily applicable to NPPD's asserted state law issue. The District Court's reading of Nebraska law is tenable; it derives some support from a decision of the Nebraska Supreme Court, *see, McGinley v. Wheat Belt Public Power Dist.*, *supra*; and it was accepted by the Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit. In light of this Court's long-standing position of refusing to second guess federal district and appellate court construction of state law, the state law issue that NPPD seeks to raise by

certiorari is clearly not one that justifies this Court's exercise of discretionary review.

### CONCLUSION

For the foregoing reasons, Respondent Nucor Corporation respectfully requests that this Court enter an Order denying NPPD's Petition for Writ of Certiorari.

Respectfully submitted,

NUCOR CORPORATION,  
Respondent

By: ROGER P. COX

HARDING & OGBORN

500 The Atrium, 1200 N Street

P. O. Box 82028

Lincoln, NE 68501-2028

*Counsel of Record*

*for Respondent*

*Nucor Corporation*

## App. 1

### NEB. REV. STAT. § 70-626

Subject to the limitations of the petition for its creation and all amendments thereto, a district may own, construct, reconstruct, purchase, lease, or otherwise acquire, improve, extend, manage, use, or operate any electric light and power plants, lines, and systems or ethanol production or distribution systems, either within or beyond, or partly within and partly beyond, the boundaries of the district and may engage in or transact business or enter into any kind of contract or arrangement with any person, firm, corporation, state, county, city, village, governmental subdivision, or agency, with the government of the United States, the Rural Electrification Administration, the Public Works Administration, or any officer, department, bureau, or agency thereof, with any corporation organized by federal law, including the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, or any successor thereof, or with any body politic or corporate for any of the purposes above mentioned, for or incident to the exercise of any one or more of the foregoing powers, or for the generation, distribution, transmission, sale, or purchase of electrical energy or ethanol for lighting, power, heating, and any and every other useful purpose whatsoever, and for any and every service involving, employing, or in any manner pertaining to the use of electrical energy, by whatever means generated or distributed, or for the financing or payment of the cost and expense incident to the acquisition or operation of any such power plant or system or ethanol production or distribution system, or incident to any obligation or indebtedness entered into or incurred by the district. In the case of the acquisition by purchase, lease, or any

## App. 2

other contractual obligation of an existing electric light and power plant, lines, or system or ethanol production or distribution system from any person, firm, association, or private corporation by any such district, a copy of the proposed contract shall be filed with the Nebraska Power Review Board and open to public inspection and examination for a period of thirty days before such proposed contract may be signed, executed, or delivered, and such proposed contract shall not be valid for any purpose and no rights may arise thereunder until after such period of thirty days has expired.

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### App. 3

#### NEB. REV. STAT. § 70-602 (Reissue 1986)

A district may be created as hereinafter provided and, when so created, shall be a public corporation and political subdivision of this state and may sue or be sued in its corporate name. A district may be composed of the territory of one or more municipalities as defined in subsection (2) of § 70-601, whether contiguous or otherwise. Nothing in Chapter 70, article 6, shall be construed to prevent the organization of a district within or partly within the territorial boundaries of another district organized hereunder, so long as the plants, systems, and works, the operation of the same, the exercise of powers, and the assumption of duties and responsibilities, of or on the part of one district, do not nullify, conflict with, or materially effect those of, or on the part of, another district.

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#### App. 4

#### RATE REVIEW PROVISION FROM NPPD-NUCOR POWER AGREEMENT

NPPD shall design large industrial primary rates payable under this Agreement in accordance with this Agreement and which rates shall be sufficient, but only sufficient, to collect the expense and estimated net revenue requirements associated with Large Industrial Primary Power Service and these rates shall be fair, reasonable and nondiscriminatory. During 1973 and thereafter at intervals not to exceed two (2) years NPPD shall prepare a study of the operating expenses and the estimated net revenue requirements for NPPD's Large Industrial Primary Power Service. The results of this study will provide the basis upon which the rates payable hereunder will be determined by NPPD based upon projected operating expenses and estimated net revenue requirements. The foregoing provisions for review of experienced net revenues and the estimated net revenue requirements and for the determination and adjustment of rates and charges shall not be construed to deprive the parties hereto of any rights or remedies, legal or equitable, which might otherwise be available pursuant to this Agreement.

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IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE  
DISTRICT OF NEBRASKA

NUCOR CORPORATION,	)	CV-85-0-773
Plaintiff,	)	
vs.	)	VERDICT
NEBRASKA PUBLIC POWER	)	
DISTRICT,	)	
Defendant.	)	

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1) Were the rates fixed and established by the Nebraska Public Power District Board of Directors for each of the years, 1974 through 1986, fair, reasonable and nondiscriminatory rates for the supplying of electrical service to Nucor?

     Yes                        X   No

2) If your answer to Interrogatory No. 1 is yes, this concludes your deliberations and you will answer Interrogatory No. 8 and then have your foreman date and sign the verdict form.

3) If your answer to Interrogatory No. 1 is no, identify below each of the years in which you find the rates and charges established by NPPD were not fair, reasonable and nondiscriminatory:

1974 <u>  X  </u>	1978 <u>  X  </u>	1982 <u>  X  </u>
1975 <u>  X  </u>	1979 <u>  X  </u>	1983 <u>  X  </u>
1976 <u>  X  </u>	1980 <u>  X  </u>	1984 <u>  X  </u>
1977 <u>  X  </u>	1981 <u>  X  </u>	1985 <u>  X  </u>
		1986 <u>  X  </u>

4) If your answer to Interrogatory No. 1 is no, has Nucor Corporation sustained any damages caused by

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those rates and charges which you have found were not fair, reasonable and nondiscriminatory?

X Yes

     No

5) If your answer to Interrogatory No. 4 is yes, insert in the blanks below the amount of damages you find plaintiff has sustained which was proximately caused by defendant's failure to set fair, reasonable and nondiscriminatory rates.

1974 \$ 47,761.00	1978 \$ 642,465.00	1982 \$998,362.00
1975 <u>\$143,284.00</u>	1979 <u>\$ 642,465.00</u>	1983 <u>\$499,181.00</u>
1976 <u>\$642,465.00</u>	1980 <u>\$ 642,465.00</u>	1984 <u>\$578,621.00</u>
1977 <u>\$572,025.00</u>	1981 <u>\$1,084,884.00</u>	1985 <u>\$499,181.00</u>
		1986 <u>\$499,181.00</u>

6) What is the total amount of the damages you find plaintiff has sustained which were proximately caused by defendant's failure to set fair, reasonable and non-discriminatory rates?

\$7,492,340.00

7) Does the rate reduction in the amount of \$1,527,301 which Nucor Corporation will receive pursuant to the Resolution of the Board of Directors of NPPD passed effective March 1, 1987, refund the damages which Nucor has sustained?

     Yes

X No

Upon your completion of this Interrogatory, you will answer Interrogatory No. 8 and your foreman will then date and sign the verdict form.

App. 7

8) Did NPPD, in intervals not exceeding two years, prepare a study of the operating expenses and the estimated net revenue requirements of Nucor?

☐ Yes

☒ No

DATED this 6th day of May, 1987.

/s/ David J. Conner, Foreman  
FOREMAN

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IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE  
DISTRICT OF NEBRASKA

NUCOR CORPORATION,	)	
	)	CV, 85-0-773
Plaintiff,	)	
	)	MEMORANDUM
v.	)	AND JUDGMENT
NEBRASKA PUBLIC POWER	)	(Filed
DISTRICT,	)	May 15, 1987)
	)	
Defendant.	)	
	)	

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This matter is presently before the Court on its own motion. Trial of this action commenced April 6, 1987, and concluded May 4, 1987. Thereafter the jury returned its verdict in favor of plaintiff on May 6, 1987.

The jury found the rates and charges established by N.P.P.D. were not fair, reasonable and nondiscriminatory for the years 1974 through 1986, inclusive. Thus, N.P.P.D. had breached the rate review provision of its contract with Nucor during each of those years. During trial, the Court found that the statute of limitations on written contracts, Neb.Rev.Stat. § 25-205, barred any recovery of damages which occurred before August 14, 1980. Therefore, judgment will be entered only for damages which occurred after [sic] date.

In answering Question No. 5 to the verdict form, the jury found following damages proximately caused by N.P.P.D.'s failure to set proper rates:

1980	-	\$ 642,465
1981	-	1,084,884
1982	-	998,362
1983	-	499,181
1984	-	578,621
1985	-	499,181
1986	-	499,181

The Court finds the 1980 figure should be prorated on the basis of the number of days remaining in the year after August 14, 1980. As such, the recoverable damages for that year amount to \$244,136.70. The sum of this figure and the damages assessed by the jury for the years 1981 through 1986, inclusive, is \$4,403,546.70.

The plaintiff seeks recovery of prejudgment interest on this amount. Under Nebraska law, however, prejudgment interest may only be recovered on claims that are liquidated. *Land Paving Co. v. D.A. Construction Co., Inc.*, 215 Neb. 406, 407, 338 N.W.2d 779, 780 (1983); *Lackawanna Leather Co. v. Martin & Stewart, Ltd.*, 730 F.2d 1197, 1204 (8th Cir. 1984). A claim is liquidated only if the evidence furnishes data which, if believed, makes it possible to compute the amount with exactness without reliance upon opinion or discretion. In this action the damage claim of plaintiff was unliquidated and plaintiff is not entitled to recover prejudgment interest.

At the conclusion of the evidence, both parties moved for directed verdicts, *see* exhibits 123 and 701. Ruling on these motions was reserved. Except as otherwise reflected in this judgment, each of said motions will be denied. Accordingly,

IT IS ORDERED that plaintiff Nucor Corporation recover from the defendant, Nebraska Public Power District, the sum of \$4,403,546.70, with interest thereon at the rate of 7.02 per cent per annum as provided by law and taxable costs of this action.

IT IS FURTHER ORDERED that the parties' respective motions for directed verdict are denied.



App. 10

DATED this 15th day of May, 1987.

BY THE COURT:

/s/ Lyle E. Strom  
LYLE E. STROM  
UNITED STATES DISTRICT  
JUDGE

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UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS  
FOR THE EIGHTH CIRCUIT

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Nos. 87-1963 & 87-2046

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Nucor Corporation,	*	
Appellee/Cross Appellant,	*	Appeals from the
v.	*	United States
Nebraska Public Power	*	District Court
District,	*	for the District
	*	of Nebraska.
Appellant/Cross Appellee.	*	

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Filed: June 30, 1988

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Before ARNOLD, Circuit Judge, ROSS and HENLEY,  
Senior Circuit Judges.

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ORDER

Nebraska Public Power District (NPPD), which provides wholesale and retail electric service throughout Nebraska, appeals from an adverse jury verdict awarding damages to Nucor Corporation (Nucor) for utility overcharges. After a month-long trial in this breach of contract action, the jury returned a verdict for Nucor in the amount of \$7,492,340 for damages sustained from 1974 through 1986. Following trial, the district court reduced the jury's award on the grounds that the statute of limitations, Neb. Rev. Stat. § 25-205, barred recovery of damages which occurred prior to August 14, 1980. The district

court entered judgment in favor of Nucor for \$4,403,546.70 based upon the jury's assessment of damages for the years 1980 through 1986. Thereafter, NPPD filed this appeal; and Nucor filed a cross-appeal, challenging the district court's application of the statute of limitations and the court's denial of prejudgment interest.

On March 22, 1988, after the parties had submitted briefs on the merits of the appeal and cross-appeal, NPPD filed with this court a suggestion of lack of jurisdiction and motion to remand with directions to vacate judgment and to dismiss the action. In its accompanying brief, NPPD argued that the district court lacked subject matter jurisdiction over the present action because the action falls within the scope of the Johnson Act of 1934, 28 U.S.C. § 1342. The court requested additional briefing by the parties on this issue, and the matter was heard by the court, along with the merits of the appeal, on June 15, 1988.

Based upon the parties' briefs and arguments on the jurisdictional issue, we conclude that the district court should have the opportunity to address this matter in the first instance. Therefore, we remand this case for the purpose of allowing the district court to address the question whether the federal courts have subject matter jurisdiction over this action, based upon the record and such additional evidence or briefing as the district court deems necessary. The district court is requested to certify its findings and conclusions on this issue to this court, which retains jurisdiction of this appeal pending remand.

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A true copy.

Attest.

/s/ Robert St. Vrain  
CLERK, U. S. COURT OF  
APPEALS, EIGHTH CIRCUIT.

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IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
FOR THE DISTRICT OF NEBRASKA

NUCOR CORPORATION,	)	
	)	
Plaintiff,	)	CV. 85-0-773
	)	
v.	)	MEMORANDUM
NEBRASKA PUBLIC POWER	)	AND ORDER
DISTRICT,	)	(Filed
	)	December 6, 1988)
Defendant.	)	
	)	

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This matter is before the Court for determination of the issue of subject matter jurisdiction after remand from the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals. **Nucor v. Nebraska Public Power District**, No. 87-1963 and No. 87-2046, slip op. (8th Cir. June 30, 1988) (Filing No. 112).

This is an action for breach of contract. Jurisdiction is premised on 28 U.S.C. § 1332 (diversity of citizenship). This matter was tried in April, 1987 and Nucor recovered a jury verdict in the amount of \$7,492,340.00, which was subsequently reduced to judgment in the amount of \$4,403,546.70 on the Court's own motion. On appeal to the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals, NPPD raised the issue of subject matter jurisdiction for the first time. NPPD contends that this court lacks jurisdiction by virtue of the Johnson Act, 28 U.S.C. § 1342.

The Johnson Act provides:

The district courts shall not enjoin, suspend or restrain the operation of, or compliance with, any order affecting rates chargeable by a public utility and made by a state administrative agency or a rate-making body of a state political subdivision, where:

- (1) jurisdiction is based solely on diversity of citizenship or repugnance of the order to the federal constitution; and
- (2) the order does not interfere with interstate commerce; and
- (3) the order has been made after reasonable notice and a hearing; and
- (4) a plain, speedy and efficient remedy may be had in the courts of such state.

28 U.S.C. § 1342.

Additional evidence regarding the jurisdictional issue was taken on September 29-30, 1988.<sup>1</sup> The Court finds it is not deprived of jurisdiction by virtue of the Johnson Act. The four statutory criteria of the Johnson Act have not been met. The following are the Court's findings of fact and conclusions of law pursuant to Fed.R.Civ.P. 52.

NPPD is a public corporation and political subdivision organized pursuant to Neb. Rev. Stat. § 70-605, et seq. It is a public utility which constructs, owns and operates electric generating plants, transmission lines, substations and distribution systems and purchases, generates, transmits, distributes and sells electricity at wholesale and retail for lighting, power, heating and other purposes. It sells power to wholesale and retail customers throughout eighty-seven (87) counties in Nebraska.

Nucor is a corporation engaged in the business of refining steel. It markets its products throughout the

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<sup>1</sup> The parties also rely on the transcript and exhibits from the trial in support of their respective positions.



United States. Its corporate headquarters are located in South Carolina. Nucor owns and operates a steel mill located five miles from Norfolk, in Stanton County, Nebraska.

NPPD provides power to Nucor. Nucor is NPPD's single largest retail customer, the only member of the Large Industrial Primary Power service class, and the only NPPD customer qualified to receive service pursuant to the HTS-2 rate schedule.

The orders at issue in this case are rate increases implemented from 1974 until 1986. NPPD's rate-making body is its Board of Directors. NPPD's rates, including the HTS-2 rate schedule, are fixed by its Board of Directors pursuant to rate-making authority under Neb. Rev. Stat. § 70-655.<sup>2</sup> The rates are adopted by resolution during open sessions of regularly scheduled meetings held at NPPD's general offices in Columbus, Nebraska. Notice of each meeting is published in **The Columbus Telegram**.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The HTS-2 rates schedules at issue were approved at meetings which occurred on July 21, 1972; November 21, 1974; October 30, 1975; November 18, 1977; October 31, 1978; August 1, 1979; November 15, 1979; November 20, 1980; November 19, 1981; November 19, 1982; and November 17, 1983.

<sup>3</sup> The notice typically provides as follows: "LEGAL NOTICE - Regular meeting of the Board of Directors of Nebraska Public Power District, which meeting will be open to the public will be held Thursday, November 18, 1982, beginning at 2 p.m., at the Columbus General Office, Columbus, Nebraska; and reconvening on Friday, November 19, 1982, at a time to be announced prior to the adjournment on November 18. An agenda for such meeting kept continuously current is

(Continued on following page)

The **Columbus Telegram** is a small-market newspaper serving the Columbus, Nebraska, area. Its circulation is between 10,000 and 11,000 people. The City of Norfolk and Village of Stanton are not included within its coverage area. The **Columbus Telegram** has only one subscriber located in Stanton County. Neither Nucor nor any of its officers subscribe to or regularly obtain The **Columbus Telegram**. Columbus, Nebraska, is located approximately forty-five (45) miles from Norfolk, Nebraska.

The evidence shows that additional notice of meetings and rate changes is provided to certain NPPD customers in certain situations. With respect to its wholesale customers (generally municipalities), NPPD conducts a wholesale rate study every two years. All ninety-seven (97) wholesale customers are notified by letter of their opportunity to request a hearing on rate changes. NPPD has conducted five or six of these hearings since 1970. Between fifty (50) and one hundred twenty-five (125) people have attended these hearings at which customers can call witnesses such as staff members or consultants. After the hearings, the rate proposals are reconsidered. Many of NPPD's contracts with the wholesale customers require such notice and the procedures were designed to facilitate a better working relationship with wholesale customers.

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(Continued from previous page)

available for public inspection during business hours at the office of the Assistant Secretary of the District at the Columbus General Office. NEBRASKA PUBLIC POWER DISTRICT." (See, e.g., Exhibits 186 and 703).

Nucor [sic] also has agreements with certain of its retail customers (retail towns) which provide for mailed notice of Board meetings (Exhibits 145B, 143, 142, 140). The evidence shows, for example, that NPPD routinely provides notice to its retail town customers that rate action is scheduled or tentatively scheduled for particular board meetings. (See, e.g., Exhibit 145(b)). Also, NPPD officials testified that notices of proposed rate increases were mailed to approximately two hundred (200) retail towns as an informational courtesy (See e.g., Exhibits 126, 128, 143 and 145(b)).

NPPD sends monthly billing statements to all of its customers. Included in the billing statements are occasional seasonal messages and advertising inserts. Notices of meetings have never been sent with the billing statements. Also, NPPD routinely places advertisements in many Nebraska newspapers.

When required in 1979 to transmit notice and conduct hearings relating to the adoption and implementation of certain standards pursuant to the Public Utility Regulatory Policies Act, 16 U.S.C. § 2611, *et seq.* (hereinafter, PURPA), NPPD caused notice to be published for three consecutive weeks in eighty-seven (87) counties. (See Exhibit 185). Public hearings were also conducted in four locations in the state.

Nucor officials, John Doherty, Nick Johnson and Donald Schaufelberger, testified that Nucor never received any advance notice of rate increases. They also testified that they had no knowledge of their right to appear at any hearing to question the rate increases.

A threshold issue is whether the Johnson Act is applicable to the present action at all. This case presents a unique situation for the reason that NPPD is a publicly owned utility which effectively regulates itself. Rate-making decisions of the Board are not subject to review by any independent intermediate regulatory body. Unlike the state administrative agencies and rate-making bodies of state political subdivisions involved in other Johnson Act cases, NPPD is itself the utility which charges and collects the rates at issue. The Court has serious reservations about the applicability of the Johnson Act in these circumstances.<sup>4</sup>

The Johnson Act envisions independent regulation. A publicly owned utility has been held not to be a public utility within the meaning of the Johnson Act. **Municipal**

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<sup>4</sup> The Court dealt with a similar issue in consideration of defendant's motion for directed verdict at trial. NPPD then asserted that this Court lacked jurisdiction to award damages for the reason that rate-making is a legislative function. NPPD relied on **McGinley v. Wheat Belt Public Power District**, 214 Neb. 178, 332 N.W.2d 915 (1983), as authority for that proposition. In **McGinley**, the Nebraska Supreme Court found that, although actions by boards of directors of public power districts are subject to judicial review, it was proper "absent evidence of individual damages" to remand the case to the board of directors of the public power district to set a proper rate. This Court found that the holding in **McGinley** was not applicable for the reason that **McGinley** involved discriminatory rates and the present action involves overcharges. At the time it overruled NPPD's motion for directed verdict, the Court was troubled by the contradiction inherent in the prospect of allowing the Board of Directors, who were ultimately found to have breached their contract to set fair rates, to set the rates again.

**Electric Utilities v. Power Authority of the State of New York**, No. 80 CIV. 1149 slip op. at 4 (S.D.N.Y. 1981) (LEXIS, Genfed library Courts file). "One cannot escape the conclusion that Congress, in passing the Johnson Act, did not foresee or intend this limited curtailment of federal jurisdiction to apply to a suit involving an entity . . . which is both a regulator and a regulatee." *Id.* The legislative history of the Act shows Congress' concern with privately owned utilities challenging orders of separate governmental rate-making authorities. See, e.g., S. Rep. No. 125, 73rd Cong., 1st Sess. 1-33 (1933); 78 Cong. Rec. 1915, 2014, 2238, 8325, 8351, 8433, 8487 (1933).

In addition, by its terms, the Johnson Act prohibits district courts from "enjoining, suspending or restraining the operation or compliance with" an order affecting rates. As noted, this is a damage action and the Court awarded no prospective relief. However, the Act has been interpreted to apply to actions seeking both declaratory relief and damages, *Tennyson v. Gas Services Co.*, 506 F.2d 1135, 1139 (10th Cir. 1974), and to actions seeking only monetary damages. *Miller v. NYS Public Service Comm'n*, 807 F.2d 28, 33 (2d Cir. 1986). Also, "[t]he act is to be broadly applied to keep challenges to orders effecting rates out of the federal courts." *Hanna Mining Co. v. Minnesota Power & Light Co.*, 739 F.2d 1368, 1370 (8th Cir. 1984). It thus appears that the Johnson Act may be applicable to this action even though the Court awarded only retrospective relief. In light of its findings that the statutory criteria of the Johnson Act are not met, the Court need not resolve these issues.

Assuming general applicability of the Johnson Act, all four of the statutory criteria must be met if federal

jurisdiction is to be excluded. **Arkansas Power & Light Co. v. Missouri Public Service Comm'n**, 829 F.2d 1444, 1449 (8th Cir. 1987). The parties concede that the first criteria has been met. Jurisdiction is based solely on diversity of citizenship.

The statute secondly requires that the order does not interfere with interstate commerce. 28 U.S.C. § 1342(2). The orders at issue here may well interfere with interstate commerce. The parties have not addressed this issue. There was evidence adduced at trial that power sold to Nucor by NPPD was generated in other states (WAPA Power). Also, the evidence shows that the products manufactured and sold by Nucor are distributed in other states. Nucor's corporate headquarters are also located in another state. Of course, a contact or effect on interstate commerce does not constitute an interference unless it is directly burdensome on interstate traffic. **Kalinsky v. Long Island Lighting Co.**, 484 F. Supp. 176, 178 (E.D.N.Y. 1980). The significance of the interstate contacts and effects in this case is unclear. The record in this case, however, does not support a finding that the orders at issue do not interfere with interstate commerce.

Third, the Johnson Act precludes federal jurisdiction where an order is entered after reasonable notice and a hearing. 28 U.S.C. § 1342(3). The Act does not define reasonable notice and hearing; "[e]xcept that it must be reasonable, the Act does not specify the kind of notice or prescribe any form or method of practice or procedure". **Mississippi Power & Light Co. v. City of Jackson, Miss.**, 9 F. Supp. 564, 568 (S.D. Miss. 1935).



The Johnson Act "does not engraft its own undefined standards of notice and hearing upon the rate-making bodies of the several states but requires no more than that which is appropriate to an 'order affecting rates.'" *Tennison*, 506 F.2d at 1141. The notice and hearing requirement has been interpreted to mean that which is adequate to meet the minimum standards of due process. *Kansas-Nebraska Natural Gas Co. v. City of St. Edward*, 134 F. Supp. 809, 827 (D. Neb. 1955), *aff'd*, 234 F.2d 436 (8th Cir. 1956). The "vital elements necessary to constitute due process of law are . . . 'a hearing before judgment, with full opportunity to present all the evidence and the arguments which the party deems important.'" *Mississippi Power & Light Co. v. City of Jackson*, 9 F. Supp. at 569.

The Act apparently contemplates actual notice and hearing. The "fact of a reasonable notice and hearing is all that need be determined for jurisdictional purposes." *Id.* What "eventually matters is the actual giving of notice and allowance of hearing." *Kansas-Nebraska Natural Gas Co. v. City of St. Edward*, 134 F. Supp. at 827. At the least, the Act requires utilization of procedures reasonably calculated, under all the circumstances to inform rate-payers of an order affecting rates. See, e.g., *Zucker v. Bell Telephone Co. of Pennsylvania*, 373 F. Supp. 748 (E.D. Pa. 1974) (holding that numerous and varied procedures including posting notice of a rate increase in business offices, together with mailing letters to all customers constituted sufficient notice under Johnson Act notwithstanding the professed lack of actual notice by plaintiff), *aff'd, without op.*, 510 F.2d 971 (3d Cir.), *cert. denied*, 422 U.S. 1027 (1975).

NPPD argues that the notice and hearing requirements are to be determined with reference only to state law. It asserts that it complied with the requirements of Nebraska's open meeting law, Neb. Rev. Stat. § 84-1408, et seq. That statute applies to all governing bodies of all political subdivisions. Neb. Rev. Stat. § 84-1409(1)(a). It requires that "[e]ach public body shall give reasonable advance notice of the time and place of each meeting by a method designated by each public body and recorded in its minutes". Neb. Rev. Stat. § 84-1411. The statute further requires "[s]uch notice shall be transmitted to all members of the public body and to the public." It is undisputed that NPPD published notice in technical compliance with its rules. Whether that notice was adequately transmitted to the public so as to constitute reasonable notice is the issue.

"Reasonable notice" is not defined in the statute, nor has it been adequately interpreted in case law. But see *Pokorny v. City of Schuyler*, 202 Neb. 334, 338, 475 N.W.2d 281, 284 (1979) (the posting of a notice in three public places at 10 p.m. on the day preceding a hearing is not reasonable advance public notice as required by § 84-8411). In another context, the Nebraska Supreme Court held that "notice can be considered adequate only if it is transmitted in a manner which, at a minimum 'has a reasonable certainty of resulting' in actual notice." *Gruenewald v. Waara*, 229 Neb. 619, 624, 428 N.W.2d 210, 214-15 (1988) (adopting *Restatement (Second) of Judgments* § 2(1)(b)(1982)).

The Court finds that under either a due process test or the Nebraska statute, NPPD did not provide reasonable notice in this case. Though not dispositive, the notice

provided to wholesale customers and retail towns and pursuant to PURPA provides evidence of easily available alternative means of notice and of NPPD's awareness of those means. Under the circumstances, the notice provided to Nucor cannot be said to have a reasonable certainty of resulting in actual notice. In fact, it appears that the opposite may have been true. Of special significance is the fact that Nucor was NPPD's only customer in the HTS-2 rate schedule class. Accordingly, it was the only rate-payer to which notice of the rate changes needed to be transmitted. A simple letter addressed to Nucor advising of the date and time of the meeting and the fact that the rate charged Nucor would be on the agenda and offering Nucor an opportunity to appear and present any information which they desired with respect to the setting of that one rate-payer rate would have fulfilled NPPD's obligation to Nucor.

The Court finds that a single publication in the classified section of the Columbus newspaper with a limited coverage area which in fact did not include the City of Norfolk does not fulfill NPPD's obligation to give Nucor reasonable notice and an opportunity to be heard with respect to the rates to be charged Nucor.

The notice published in the **Columbus Telegram** did not contain any specific notice that rate-setting was the subject of the board meetings. The publication provided no more than that an agenda could be inspected at general offices in Columbus. No agenda was published or sent to the public, and no provisions were made by which rate-payer could obtain a copy of the agenda. In addition, the notice does not indicate that rate payers could appear,

be heard or present evidence at the board meetings. Under the circumstances, the notice cannot be considered adequate.

There is no dispute that Nucor did not have any actual hearing. The "vital part of Section 1342(c) is the provision for a hearing". *General Investment & Service Corp. v. Wichita Water Co.*, 236 F.2d 464, 467 (10th Cir. 1956). The purpose of a hearing following notice "is to give an interested party an opportunity to present evidence and to have findings of fact based thereon made by the administrative agency which will then form the basis of a judicial review of the order". *Id.* The absence of such opportunities does not constitute a fair hearing essential to due process. *Id.* There is "[n]o doubt Congress had this in mind when it passed the Johnson act . . . [i]n the absence of such safeguards, Congress intended the federal court should have jurisdiction." *Id.*

The evidence shows that Nucor was given yearly rate increases which were based in part on cost analyses done by NPPD for wholesale rates. The wholesale customers were given notice and an opportunity to contest the rates while Nucor was not. Nucor had no reason to question the reasonableness of the rates until 1982 when the increase in power costs did not comport with decreased costs in other areas. At that point Nucor hired an independent consultant and requested access to the studies upon which NPPD's rates were based. Nucor later obtained a copy of the 1981 Beck study, and found that NPPD had increased Nucor's rates by 15 percent when NPPD's consultants had recommended a decrease of 3.9 percent. In the context of negotiations for settlement of the claim which eventually became this lawsuit, Nucor

representatives were present at a meeting but were never afforded an opportunity to present any evidence with respect to their consultant's conclusions. Those meetings cannot be considered a hearing even under a minimal standard. In fact, when approached by a Nucor official about the possibility of appearing at a board meeting, a NPPD board member assured the Nucor official that their concerns would be presented to the board. Under the circumstances, it is clear to the Court that Nucor has not been accorded due process in this matter.

The fourth criteria under the Johnson Act is that federal jurisdiction is precluded if a plain, speedy and efficient remedy may be had in the courts of such state. The Court cannot state that this requirement has been met. Actions by Boards of Directors of Public Power Districts are subject to judicial review but rate-payers have an inadequate remedy in that actions must be remanded to the Board of Directors for rate setting in most cases. See, e.g., *McGinley v. Wheatbelt Public Power District*, 214 Neb. at 189, 332 N.W.2d at 921-22.

Accordingly, the Court finds that federal jurisdiction is not precluded by the Johnson Act. These findings are hereby certified to the United States Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit.

DATED this 6th day of December, 1988.

BY THE COURT:

/s/ Lyle E. Strom  
LYLE E. STROM,  
Chief Judge  
United States  
District Court

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IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE  
DISTRICT OF NEBRASKA

NUCOR CORPORATION,	)	
	)	CV. 85-0-773
Plaintiff,	)	
	)	ORDER NUNC
v.	)	PRO TUNC
NEBRASKA PUBLIC POWER	)	(Filed
DISTRICT,	)	January 17,
	)	1989)
Defendant.	)	
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This matter is before the Court on its own motion. In order to correct certain inadvertent errors in its earlier memorandum and order (Filing No. 135),

IT IS ORDERED:

1) The first sentence of the third paragraph on page 4 is amended to state:

NPPD also has agreements with certain of its retail customers (retail towns) which provide for mailed notice of Board meetings (Exhibits 145B, 143, 142, 140).

2) The third paragraph on page 5 is amended to state:

Nucor officials, John Doherty and Nick Johnson testified that Nucor never received any advance notice of rate increases. They also testified that they had no knowledge of their right to appear at any hearing to question the rate increases. The testimony of Mr. Schaufelberger, the President and Chief Executive Officer of NPPD, is not inconsistent with the testimony of Mr. Doherty and Mr. Johnson.

App. 28

DATED this 17th day of January, 1989.

BY THE COURT:

/s/ Lyle E. Strom  
LYLE E. STROM, Chief Judge  
United States District Court

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UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS  
FOR THE EIGHTH CIRCUIT

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No. 87-1963  
No. 87-2046

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Nucor Corporation,	*	
	*	
Appellee,	*	Appeal from the
v.	*	United States
Nebraska Public Power	*	District Court for
District,	*	the District of
	*	Nebraska.
Appellant.	*	
	*	

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Submitted: May 12, 1989

Filed: December 13, 1989

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Before JOHN R. GIBSON, Circuit Judge, HEANEY, Senior  
Circuit Judge, and WOLLMAN, Circuit Judge.

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JOHN R. GIBSON, Circuit Judge.

Nebraska Public Power District appeals from a judgment in favor of Nucor Corporation on a breach of contract claim against Nebraska Power based on electric rate overcharges. A panel of this court heard argument and then remanded for additional findings on the issue of whether the Johnson Act, 28 U.S.C. § 1342 (1982), required us to hold that the district court lacked jurisdiction to entertain this action. The district court<sup>1</sup> tried the

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<sup>1</sup> The Honorable Lyle E. Strom, United States District Judge for the District of Nebraska.

issue and certified its findings to this court. We affirm the district court's determination that the Johnson Act did not deprive it of jurisdiction, and we affirm the judgment on the merits.

Nebraska Power is a public corporation which provides wholesale and retail electric service throughout Nebraska. It owns and operates electric generation, transmission, and distribution facilities. Nebraska Power's largest customer, as measured by electrical usage, is Nucor, a Delaware corporation with its principal place of business in Charlotte, North Carolina. Nucor operates a steel mill near Norfolk, Nebraska, which uses electric arc furnaces to melt scrap metal. In 1972, Nebraska Power and Nucor entered into a contract for Nebraska Power to fulfill Nucor's electrical needs at the Norfolk plant. The contract contained a rate schedule, designated as HTS-2, which is available only to industrial or manufacturing customers which meet minimum demand requirements and receive service directly from high voltage facilities. Nucor is the only customer to qualify for the HTS-2 rate.

Nebraska Power establishes its electrical rates through resolutions enacted by its board of directors. No state administrative agency in Nebraska is authorized to review Nebraska Power's rates; rather, rates are subject to direct judicial review in state court. Nebraska law requires that the rates be fair, reasonable, and non-discriminatory. Neb. Rev. Stat. § 70-655 (Reissue 1986).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The statute provides:

The board of directors of any district organized under or subject to Chapter 70, article 6, shall have

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The contract in issue contained a rate review provision which also required that the rate be fair, reasonable, and nondiscriminatory. The contract further provided that the rate must be "sufficient, but only sufficient, to collect the expense and estimated net revenue requirements associated with Large Industrial Primary Power Service." During 1973 and at two year intervals thereafter, Nebraska Power was required by the contract to prepare a study of the operating expenses and estimated net revenue requirements for this service, and Nucor's rates were to be based on the results of the studies.

Nucor brought this action against Nebraska Power claiming that Nebraska Power had continuously breached the agreement by charging unfair, unreasonable, and discriminatory rates to Nucor by using incorrect, improper, and unfair methods to allocate costs; failing to grant credits for hydroelectric power; and failing to follow the recommendations of its own consultant as to the rate

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the power and be required to fix, establish, and collect adequate rates, tolls, rents, and other charges for electrical energy, water service, water storage, and for any and all other commodities, including ethanol, services, or facilities sold, furnished, or supplied by the district, which rates, tolls, rents, and charges shall be fair, reasonable, nondiscriminatory, and so adjusted as in a fair and equitable manner to confer upon and distribute among the users and consumers of commodities and services furnished or sold by the district the benefits of a successful and profitable operation and conduct of the business of the district.

charged Nucor. It prayed for damages and appropriate injunctive relief.

At trial, the jury was instructed on a breach of contract theory which required Nucor to establish by a preponderance of the evidence that Nebraska Power had breached one or more of its obligations under the rate review provision, that the breaches proximately caused damage to Nucor, and to show the extent of Nucor's damage. The jury was instructed that Nebraska law, as embodied in section 70-655, authorized the board of directors to establish rates and required that such rates be fair, reasonable, and nondiscriminatory. The jury was also instructed that this section of the Nebraska statutes should be considered part of the contract between Nucor and Nebraska Power. Special interrogatories were submitted to the jury, and the jury found that the rate for each year from 1974 through 1986 was not fair, reasonable, and nondiscriminatory. The jury also specified the amount of damages sustained by Nucor for each year, an amount totalling \$7,492,340. The court entered judgment only for damages occurring after August 14, 1980, determined to be \$4,403,546.70, because it found that the statute of limitations applicable to written contracts barred recovery for damages before that date.

Nebraska Power appealed the judgment to this court, arguing that ratemaking is a legislative function which cannot be exercised by the courts, that the district court usurped the legislative power vested in the Nebraska Power board of directors, and that the contract rate review provision neither alters the nature of the cause of action nor permits an award of damages. Nebraska Power further asserts that the district court erred in permitting

the jury to construe the contractual and statutory terms and in admitting certain evidence.

When a panel of this court heard this appeal, a question of jurisdiction arose because of concern that the Johnson Act<sup>3</sup> applied. The Johnson Act prohibits district courts from interfering with ratemaking by public utilities if the four criteria of the Act are met. The case was then remanded to the district court for additional findings on the jurisdictional issue. The district court began by noting that Nebraska Power is a publicly-owned-utility which regulates itself, and that its ratemaking decisions are not subject to review by any independent regulatory body. Although the court expressed serious reservations about whether the Johnson Act applied in such circumstances, it did not resolve the issue.

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<sup>3</sup> The Johnson Act provides:

The district courts shall not enjoin, suspend or restrain the operation of, or compliance with, any order affecting rates chargeable by a public utility and made by a State administrative agency or a ratemaking body of a State political subdivision, where:

- (1) Jurisdiction is based solely on diversity of citizenship or repugnance of the order to the Federal Constitution; and,
- (2) The order does not interfere with interstate commerce; and,
- (3) The order has been made after reasonable notice and hearing; and,

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Assuming that the Act did apply, the court recognized that all four statutory criteria must be satisfied in order to bar federal jurisdiction, citing our decision in *Arkansas Power & Light Co. v. Missouri Public Service Commission*, 829 F.2d 1444, 1449 (8th Cir. 1987). Since subject matter jurisdiction in federal court is based solely upon diversity of citizenship, the parties conceded that the first element had been satisfied. As to the second element, requiring that the order not interfere with interstate commerce, the court noted that the parties had not addressed this issue but nevertheless concluded that the order could potentially interfere with interstate commerce. This conclusion was based on evidence that Nebraska Power sold Nucor electricity generated in other states, that Nucor's products were distributed in other states, and that Nucor's corporate headquarters were located outside of Nebraska.

The court then turned to the third requirement of the Johnson Act, which requires that the rate order be made after reasonable notice and a hearing. The court examined both the due process clause of the Constitution and Nebraska statutes, and found that Nebraska Power did not provide reasonable notice to Nucor under either standard. Finally, the court analyzed the fourth requirement of the Johnson Act, that there exists a plain, speedy, and efficient remedy in the state courts. The court found that the state court remedy, which, in most cases, would be to

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- (4) A plain, speedy and efficient remedy may be had in the courts of such State.



remand to the board of directors to establish new rates, was inadequate. Accordingly, the court determined that the Johnson Act did not deprive federal courts of jurisdiction in this case, and certified its findings to this court.

I.

We first consider the issue of federal jurisdiction. It is well-settled that the plaintiff bears the burden of establishing subject matter jurisdiction. Nebraska Power asserts that the district court erred by improperly requiring it to bear the burden of establishing that federal jurisdiction was lacking rather than requiring Nucor to establish that jurisdiction was present. Our reading of the record, however, reveals that the court properly placed the burden upon Nucor to establish federal jurisdiction. Furthermore, we believe the record fully supports the court's conclusion that the Johnson Act does not preclude federal jurisdiction in this case.

The district court, in its order determining that the Johnson Act did not bar its jurisdiction, expressed serious doubts that the Act was intended to preclude federal jurisdiction in cases such as this one, where rates are established by a public utility not regulated by an independent state agency. Nebraska Power argues that since the Johnson Act applies to all ratemaking bodies of political subdivisions, this necessarily includes the board of directors of the Nebraska Public Power District. As the district court did not rest its decision on this ground, it is not necessary that we do so.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The legislative history of the Act as passed, as well as that of a previous version, specifically referred to the existence



We may resolve the jurisdictional issue, however, without holding that the Johnson Act is inapplicable here because we are satisfied that the district court correctly determined that the Act's requirements are not met and thus federal courts are not deprived of jurisdiction by the Act.

We turn first to the notice requirement of the Johnson Act and recite the district court's findings of fact on this issue. Nucor was Nebraska Power's single largest retail customer and the only customer qualified to receive service under the HTS-2 rate schedule. Nebraska Power's board of directors set utility rates by adopting rate resolutions during board meetings at Nebraska Power's general office in Columbus, Nebraska. Columbus is approximately 45 miles from Norfolk, which is close to

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of state commissions authorized to review and determine rates charged by public utilities. Also, during discussion of the bill, the bill's sponsor, Senator Johnson, referred to the independent regulation of public utilities and the importance of the bill to every state that has a public service commission. 28 Cong. Rec. 1829 (1934).

We express serious reservations as to whether the Act was intended to apply in this situation. Nebraska Power's argument that only about a third of the 2,096 publicly-owned electric utilities in the United States are subject to regulation by state agencies does not shed light on the intent of Congress in passing the Johnson Act. We believe that the primary thrust of the Act is to prevent public utilities from having access to a federal forum to redetermine rates previously reviewed by a state regulatory commission. As the rates before us were set by the board of directors of Nebraska Power, there is no danger of interfering with an independent regulatory agency's review of these rates because no such agency exists here.

Nucor's steel mill. Advance notice of each board meeting was published in *The Columbus Telegram* which has a circulation of 10,000 to 12,000 readers. Norfolk is not within the *Telegram's* coverage area. Neither Nucor nor its officers subscribed to the *Telegram*, and, in fact, the newspaper had only one subscriber in Stanton county where Nucor's steel mill is located. Nucor officials testified that Nucor had never received advance notice of rate increases, and had no knowledge of their right to appear at hearings to inquire about rate increases.

In certain situations, additional notice of board meetings and rate changes was given to Nebraska Power customers. Every two years, Nebraska Power conducted a wholesale rate study and notified by mail all 97 wholesale customers of their right to request a hearing on rate changes. Nebraska Power has held five or six rate hearings since 1970, and between 50 and 175 people have attended each meeting. Also, Nebraska Power routinely has given notice of proposed rate action to "retail towns," which sell electricity to their residents, pursuant to an agreement with the towns. In addition, Nebraska Power has given notice of proposed rate increases to approximately 200 retail towns as an informational courtesy.

Nebraska Power mailed monthly billing statements to all customers but has never included notices of meetings with these mailings. Nebraska Power has, however, occasionally included advertising inserts with the billing statements. Advertisements are also routinely placed in many Nebraska newspapers.

Nebraska Power makes no effort to argue that these findings by the district court are clearly erroneous. Rather, it argues that it is irrelevant to view Nucor's rates in a factual vacuum, or to hold that Nucor was entitled to special notice just because other customers in other situations have received individualized notice. Nebraska Power stresses that Nucor neither inquired about future costs or anticipated rate changes, nor requested specific advance notice. Furthermore, each time there was a rate change, Nebraska Power's rates and contracts manager met with Nucor's general manager to review the change and answer questions.

Nebraska Power points out that the Nebraska Public Meetings Law, Neb. Rev. Stat. § 84-1408 to -1414 (Reissue 1987), does not specify a method for publication of notice, but instead requires "reasonable advance publicized notice of the time and place of each meeting by a method designated by each public body." *Id.* § 84-1411. In compliance with this mandate, Nebraska Power had adopted a resolution that notice would be published in the *Telegram*, that the assistant secretary would notify any members of the news media requesting notification, and that a current agenda of board meetings would be kept available for public inspection at its Columbus office.

Nebraska Power asserts that its duty to provide notice and a hearing is to be determined only by reference to state law, and not by a due process standard. The district court rejected this argument, recognizing that the notice and hearing requirement of the Act had been interpreted as requiring that the minimum standards of due process be met. The court examined Nebraska case law to

determine what constitutes "reasonable notice" as required by due process and noted that "notice can be considered adequate only if it is transmitted in a manner which, at a minimum, 'has a reasonable certainty of resulting' in actual notice." *Gruenewald v. Waara*, 229 Neb. 619, 624, 428 N.W.2d 210, 215 (1988) (quoting Restatement (Second) of Judgments § 2(1)(b), at 34 (1982)).

The evidence fully supports the district court's finding that the notice given Nucor did not have a reasonable certainty of giving Nucor actual notice. The publication in *The Columbus Telegram*, a newspaper with very limited circulation in the city of Norfolk, did not fulfill Nebraska Power's obligation. The notice did not state that ratemaking was the purpose of the board meetings, but stated little more than that an agenda was available at the general office. Further, Nebraska Power regularly performed cost analyses for wholesale rates and based Nucor's yearly rate increases, in part, on these analyses. The wholesale customers were given notice of the rate changes based on the analyses while Nucor, a retail customer, was not. The district court did not err in its determination that reasonable notice was lacking here.

It is well-established that all four criteria of the Johnson Act must be satisfied to preclude federal jurisdiction, and the failure to satisfy the notice requirement is sufficient to end our examination. *Arkansas Power & Light Co. v. Missouri Pub. Serv. Comm'n*, 829 F.2d 1444, 1449 (8th Cir. 1987). We are satisfied, however, that the district court correctly determined that another criterion is not met here either. The Johnson Act requires that the rate order not interfere with interstate commerce. Nebraska Power

asserts that the district court erred in finding such interference because Nucor failed to establish that the rate was directly burdensome or discriminatory. We recognize the tentative nature of the court's comments, but nevertheless conclude that the court did not err. There was evidence that Nebraska Power wrongfully deprived Nucor of Western Area Power Administration benefits and that this resulted in approximately \$7 million in overcharges to Nucor. Nucor presented testimony that this affected the cost of Nucor's goods for sale in interstate commerce. Considering this and the other factors identified by the district court, we believe that the court did not err in assessing the impact on interstate commerce.

We conclude that the district court did not err in determining that the Johnson Act did not deprive it of jurisdiction to consider the merits of this case.

Nebraska Power appears to suggest that abstention under *Burford v. Sun Oil Co.*, 319 U.S. 315 (1943), would be appropriate in this case. We believe that the facts justifying abstention in that case are lacking here. In *Burford*, the authority for the challenged decision making had been delegated to an independent commission, and the state had developed a scheme to centralize direct review of the commission's decisions in state courts of a single Texas county. In the case before us, however, the challenges are not directed at the decisions of an independent regulatory commission, nor is there a centralized state judicial review scheme in place. In addition, the fact that Nebraska Power has delayed raising the abstention issue until after a full trial on the merits shows a lack of respect for the considerations of comity underlying *Burford*.

## II.

The essence of Nucor's breach of contract claim is that Nebraska Power failed to fulfill its contractual obligations to charge fair, reasonable, and nondiscriminatory rates, and to perform a cost study every two years. Specifically, Nucor argues that Nebraska Power failed to properly allocate demand costs and to regularly perform a fully-allocated cost of service study. According to Nucor, this caused Nucor to pay a disproportionate share of the demand-related costs of the power district during the years 1974 through 1986. Nucor also argues that various undisclosed charges were mishandled in determining Nucor's rate: (1) allocating the carrying, operation, and maintenance charges associated with a 230 kilovolts transmission line; (2) depriving Nucor of its full allotment of Western Area Power Administration benefits; and (3) using an incorrect production cost adjustment factor for Nucor.

Nebraska Power's substantive arguments essentially revolve around how the action is characterized, asserting that this case is more accurately characterized as ratemaking rather than as a breach of contract claim. It asserts that ratemaking is a legislative function which may not be exercised by courts, that the court's submission of this case to the jury usurped the legislative power vested in the board of directors, that the contract rate review provision neither alters the nature of the action nor permits an award of damages, and that it was error to permit the jury to construe the terms of the contract and statute.

The nature of this action must be determined by the pleadings and the issues submitted to the jury. In its



complaint, Nucor framed its cause of action as one for breach of contract based upon breach of the rate review provision of the contract, violation of section 70-655 requiring Nebraska Power to charge rates that are fair, reasonable, and nondiscriminatory, use of improper practices to allocate costs, and use of practices contrary to the recommendation of its own consultant. The case was submitted to the jury as a breach of contract claim, and the jury was given special interrogatories which required it to specifically decide whether the board had set rates which were fair, reasonable, and nondiscriminatory. We would be troubled by this language in the interrogatories, which required the jury to make findings which are arguably related to a regulatory function, were it not for the fact that this language is present in both the contract and the statute. Both require rates to be "fair, reasonable, and nondiscriminatory," and the jury was instructed that section 70-655 was to be considered a part of the contract. Thus, in order to determine whether Nebraska Power had breached the contract, the jury had to determine whether Nucor's rates were fair, reasonable, and nondiscriminatory. The court's instructions to the jury were not erroneous in this regard.

In support of its arguments, Nebraska Power identifies certain Nebraska Supreme Court decisions, particularly *McGinley v. Wheat Belt Public Power District*, 214 Neb. 178, 332 N.W.2d 915 (1983), and *York County Rural Public Power District v. O'Connor*, 172 Neb. 602, 111 N.W.2d 376 (1961), as defining the ratemaking authority of the board of directors and the court's role in reviewing such rates. *York* established that courts have the authority to review rates set by public power districts. *Id.* at 608,



111 N.W.2d at 379. *McGinley*, Nebraska Power argues, stands for the proposition that the only remedy available upon review is for a court to remand the case to the board of directors to exercise its ratemaking function. Since ratemaking is a legislative, not a judicial, function, Nebraska Power concludes that submitting this case to a jury usurped the legislative power of the board and constituted an impermissible attempt at ratemaking.

We believe Nebraska Power's reliance on *McGinley* is misplaced. The *McGinley* court held that "the proper action to take in a case of this nature, *absent specific evidence of individual damages*, is to require the board of directors . . . to set a proper rate." *McGinley*, 214 Neb. at 189, 332 N.W.2d at 921 (emphasis added). This suggests that a court presented with evidence of individual damages, as was the court below, is empowered to award monetary damages rather than remanding to the board of directors. In addition, an underlying assumption of Nebraska Power's argument is that Nucor's action is based on allegedly discriminatory rates, as was the case in *McGinley*. This mischaracterizes the nature of the suit before us, which is a claim to recover overcharges based on a breach of contract. *McGinley* dealt with the difference in rates charged customers in similar circumstances. The focus here is upon the rate charged only one customer, Nucor. Moreover, the jury verdict and the judgment entered by the court did not determine what rates Nebraska Power must charge in the future, but rather, merely determined the amount of past overcharges.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The dissent argues that we accept Nucor's cost allocation method as the only fair, reasonable and nondiscriminatory

Nebraska Power asserts that the district court erred in permitting the jury to construe the terms of the contract and the statute in issue, Neb. Rev. Stat. § 70-655, because the terms in issue were not ambiguous. We believe there was no error. The contract, which incorporated the language of the statute, used words that were ambiguous in the sense that they were of a sufficiently technical nature to be the subject of expert testimony. Both parties presented expert testimony which offered the jury differing views of the terminology. Under the circumstances, it was proper for the jury, aided by expert testimony, to consider the terminology in issue here. The role of the jury in such circumstances has been recognized by Nebraska cases. *Olds v. Jamison*, 195 Neb. 388, 392, 238 N.W.2d 459, 462 (1976); *Ely Constr. Co. v. S & S Corp.*, 184 Neb. 59, 67, 165 N.W.2d 562, 567 (1969). The parties raise numerous points in their arguments which we believe lack sufficient merit to justify further discussion of this issue.

### III.

Nebraska Power asserts error in the district court's resolution of certain evidentiary issues. It argues that it

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method. This mischaracterizes our holding. We simply hold that a jury could properly find, based upon evidence of Nebraska Power's treatment of several items of cost allocation, outlined above, that the particular rate charged was not fair, reasonable, [sic] and nondiscriminatory, and, upon being presented with specific evidence of individual damages, could properly determine the amount of past overcharges.

was improper for the court to receive testimony from Nucor's experts regarding terms of art and industry standards, to permit the jury to construe the contract and statute with reference to this testimony, and to receive evidence and testimony concerning rate making methodology.

The crux of Nebraska Power's argument is that the court should have defined for the jury the terms "fair," "reasonable," and "nondiscriminatory," rather than permitting experts to testify as to their meanings and instructing the jury that it could consider the experts' definitions. These terms are not technical in nature, Nebraska Power argues, and thus expert testimony is not necessary. It relies on *Marx & Co. v. Diners' Club, Inc.*, 550 F.2d 505 (2d Cir.), *cert. denied*, 434 U.S. 861 (1977), in which the court held that it was improper to allow a securities expert to testify as to the meaning of the term "best efforts" in a contract dispute. *Id.* at 508-09.

We believe the court did not err in admitting this expert testimony. Courts have frequently recognized the value of expert testimony defining terms of a technical nature and testifying as to whether such terms have acquired a well-recognized meaning in the business or industry. See *Energy Oils v. Montana Power Co.*, 626 F.2d 731, 736-37 (9th Cir. 1980). We note that Nebraska Power experts also testified as to the meanings of terms of art and whether Nebraska Power's ratemaking methods were used elsewhere in the industry. Finally, we observe that the admission of evidence is largely left to the discretion of the trial court. We conclude that there was no abuse of discretion in admitting this testimony and no

error of law in instructing the jury as to the use of such testimony.

The court also erred, according to Nebraska Power, in admitting an exhibit prepared by Nucor which utilized a four-month coincident peak cost allocation method. Both parties vigorously argue, in exhaustive technical detail, whether this evidence was properly admitted.

We are not persuaded that the court erred in this respect. We first observe that Nebraska Power also introduced an exhibit demonstrating a method of cost computation. More importantly, this case revolves around alleged overcharges resulting from improper cost allocation, and resolution of these issues required determining whether the rates were fair, reasonable, and non-discriminatory. We believe that this exhibit was relevant to such issues. In essence, the parties attempt to escalate the simple question of admissibility of an exhibit into an additional opportunity to address the merits of this case.

Nebraska Power's final argument is that the verdict and judgment are not supported by the evidence. This argument is primarily addressed to the amount of damages awarded, based on an assertion that the total jury award bears no relationship to Nucor's evidence of damages. This is without merit. Where it has been proven that damage has been sustained, and the only uncertainty concerns the exact amount, there need only be evidence from which the amount of damages can be ascertained with reasonable certainty. *Nebraska Pub. Power Dist. v. Austin Power*, 773 F.2d 960, 969 (8th Cir. 1985); *Delp v. Laier*, 205 Neb. 417, 425, 288 N.W.2d 265, 269-70 (1980). Nucor's expert, Stephen Daniel, who was vigorously

cross-examined, testified that the total amount of overcharges was \$15,744,844. We believe there is sufficient evidence to support the jury's determination.

#### IV.

Nucor argues that the court erred in entering judgment only for damages sustained in the years 1981 to 1986, excluding the earlier years as barred by the statute of limitations. Nucor contends that it was entitled to a jury determination of whether there was fraudulent concealment by Nebraska Power and whether such conduct defeats the operation of the statute of limitations. Nucor essentially offers two arguments in support of its fraudulent concealment theory: (1) that Nebraska Power committed affirmative acts of fraudulent concealment, which included inducing Nucor to locate in its service area with awareness of the disparity between the parties' knowledge of ratemaking methodology, withholding various cost studies, and communicating incorrect information regarding cost allocation; and (2) that even if there were not affirmative acts of fraudulent concealment, there is a fiduciary relationship between the parties such that mere silence on the part of Nebraska Power constitutes fraudulent concealment which will toll the statute of limitations.

Addressing first the claim that Nebraska Power committed affirmative acts of fraudulent concealment which warrant tolling the statute of limitations, we are not persuaded that the district court erred in refusing to submit this issue to the jury. While we recognize that issues of fraudulent concealment relating to a statute of limitations defense are normally questions of fact for the

jury, *Vrbsky v. Arendt*, 119 Neb. 443, 448-49, 229 N.W. 337, 339 (1930), when the evidence leaves no room for a reasonable difference of opinion, the district court may resolve the issue as a matter of law. *Trace X Chemical, Inc. v. Canadian Indus., Ltd.*, 738 F.2d 261, 265 (8th Cir. 1984), cert. denied, 469 U.S. 1160 (1985). Moreover, "a mere scintilla of evidence is insufficient to present a question for the jury." *J.E.K. Indus. v. Shoemaker*, 763 F.2d 348, 353 (8th Cir. 1985).

We also believe that the court did not err in refusing to submit to the jury Nucor's claim that a fiduciary relationship existed between the parties such that Nebraska Power had a duty to disclose, and therefore its silence constituted fraudulent concealment. The Nebraska Supreme Court has not had occasion to decide whether the existence of a fiduciary relationship prevents a cause of action from being barred by the statute of limitations if the defendant commits no affirmative acts of concealment but is merely silent. Nor has the Nebraska Supreme Court ruled that a public utility owes the obligations of a fiduciary to its customers. In the absence of guiding precedent, "we accord substantial deference to the district court's interpretation of state law." *Kansas State Bank in Holton v. Citizens Bank of Windsor*, 737 F.2d 1490, 1496 (8th Cir. 1984).

Finally, we address Nucor's argument that the district court erred in failing to award prejudgment interest. Nucor's argument is without merit. The court correctly recognized that, under Nebraska law, prejudgment interest may only be recovered on claims which are liquidated. The court acknowledged that the design of rates is not an exact science and concluded that Nucor's claim was not liquidated. It was not possible to compute the



amount of damages here with exactness without reliance upon opinion or discretion. *See Hill v. City of Lincoln*, 221 Neb. 719, 723, 380 N.W.2d 296, 299 (1986).

In sum, we hold that because the requirements of the Johnson Act are not satisfied, the Act does not preclude federal jurisdiction in this case. We also hold that Nucor is entitled to its judgment of \$4,403,546.70 on its breach of contract claim but is not entitled to prejudgment interest. Accordingly, we affirm the judgment of the district court.

HEANEY, Senior Circuit Judge, concurring in part and dissenting in part.

I concur in Parts I, III and IV of the majority opinion as far as it is necessary to reach those issues. I dissent from Part II.

While I accept that the Power District may have breached its duty to charge fair, reasonable and non-discriminatory rates, I believe that it was error for the district court to submit the question of damages to the jury. Damages are too speculative.

This Court lacks both the wherewithal and the legislative authority to determine damages in this instance because more than one fair, reasonable and non-discriminatory rate schedule may exist. Courts do not have the expertise or resources necessary to determine proper rate schedules or to permit an integrated approach to rate regulation. Moreover, the power of a Nebraska court is limited to determining only whether the rate schedule in question is fair, reasonable and non-discriminatory. *See, e.g., McGinley v. Wheat Belt Public Power District*, 332 N.W.2d 915 (Neb. 1983).



Fixing a compensation which public service corporations may charge for services to be rendered by them is legislating; it is lawmaking. The power of the courts is limited to declaring what the law is, and they are precluded by the Constitution from legislative functions; . . . [W]e know of no court which has ever claimed it had the authority to determine what compensation would be a reasonable one for a service to be performed by such a corporation.

*Nebraska Telephone Co. v. State*, 76 N.W. 171, 174 (Neb. 1898). See also, *Metropolitan Utilities Dist. v. City of Omaha*, 107 N.W.2d 397 (Neb. 1961) ("It would appear there are several formulas, under approved accounting methods, by which the board of directors of the [sewage] district could determine the cost. . . . However, it should be remembered that it is not for the city or the courts to determine what the formula is to be, but it is a matter for the board of directors of the district to decide. . . ."). Thus, I am unwilling to accept, as the majority appears to have done, that Nucor's cost allocation methodology is the only fair, reasonable and nondiscriminatory method.

The remedy of damages is not supported by Nebraska case law. *McGinley v. Wheat Belt Public Power District*, 332 N.W.2d 915 (Neb. 1983); *York County Rural Public Power District v. O'Connor*, 111 N.W. 2d 376 (Neb. 1961).

In *York County*, the Nebraska Supreme Court held that the plaintiff power district could recover in damages the difference between amount paid to the plaintiff by the defendant consumer and amount required by a new rate schedule adopted by the plaintiff power district that the court held to be fair, reasonable and nondiscriminatory.

In *McGinley*, the Nebraska Supreme Court denied damages even though it found the rate charged to plaintiffs unfair, unreasonable and discriminatory. *McGinley v. Wheat Belt Public Power District*, 332 N.W.2d at 921.

Having therefore found the rate invalid, we are now confronted with determining the proper relief to be granted. Members of Rate Class 76<sup>6</sup> have asked this court to render judgment for the members of Rate Class 76 in an amount equal to the difference between what members of the Rate 75 paid and what members of Rate 76 paid. Were we to do that, we would be in effect granting to members of Rate Class 76 the same unjust and arbitrary rate which was granted to members of Rate Class 75 and which we have now declared invalid. Such relief is not appropriate in a case of this nature. . . .

While there are cases to be found where damages such as requested by the plaintiffs herein have been awarded, they are cases generally where both a statute authorizes such damages and the evidence supports such damages.

*Id.*

The majority argues that the instant case is distinguishable from *McGinley* because "specific evidence of individual damages" exists. *Ante* at 13 (quoting *McGinley*, 332 N.W.2d at 921). I disagree. First, even though the rate charged by the Power District was unfair, unreasonable

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<sup>6</sup> *McGinley* involved different rates charged to consumers who used energy in exactly the same manner but for the date they signed on as customers of the Power District. Rate Class 75 included all customers receiving service before a certain date in 1975. Rate Class 76 included all customers receiving service after that date in 1975.

and discriminatory, there exists no basis upon which a court could determine the fair, reasonable and non-discriminatory cost allocation methodology that the Power District will ultimately choose. Second, the practical effect of granting damages in the instant case is similar to the practical effect of granting damages in *McGinley*. In both cases, the validity of amount paid is questionable. See *Federal Power Commission v. Texaco. Inc.*, 417 U.S. 380, 387 (1974) ("To declare that a particular method of rate regulation is so sanctified as to make it highly unlikely that any other method could be sustained" is inconsistent with clearly articulated Supreme Court precedent). Thus, damages are speculative.

The fact that a written contract exists between Nucor and the Power District does not expand the scope of judicial review, since the contract terms, "fair, reasonable and nondiscriminatory," are subject to the provisions of Neb. Rev. Stat. § 70-655. The contract language is entirely consistent with the statutory language, and the meaning of each is the same, controlled by the statute. A holding that the Power District breached its contract with Nucor by charging an unfair, unreasonable and discriminatory rate schedule is nothing more or nothing less than a holding that the Power District breached its statutory duty. The distinction between an action for a breach of contract and an action for a breach of statutory duty, whatever that may be in this instance, has no relevance as to the question of whether damages can be awarded or calculated.

The appropriate remedy in this circumstance is to remand the matter to the Board of Directors of the Power District and order it to hold a prompt hearing as to rates

for the years in question. All classes of consumers, including Nucor, the farmers who use power for irrigation, and the homeowners who use power for air conditioning, must be given adequate notice and opportunity to participate at this hearing. Once this is done, the Power District can determine the fair, reasonable and nondiscriminatory rates it intends to charge all consumers. From that determination, the Power District must, at that time, rebate all overcharges that have resulted.

A true copy.

Attest:

CLERK, U. S. COURT OF APPEALS, EIGHTH CIRCUIT.

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UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS  
FOR THE EIGHTH CIRCUIT

Nos. 87-1963/2046NE

Nucor Corporation,

Appellee,

v.

Nebraska Public Power  
District,

Appellant.

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\*  
\* Order Denying  
\* Petition for  
\* Rehearing and  
\* Suggestion for  
\* Rehearing  
\* En Banc

Appellant's suggestion for rehearing en banc has been considered by the court and is denied by reason of the lack of a majority of the active judges voting to rehear the case en banc. Judge Arnold took no part in the consideration or decision of the petition for rehearing en banc.

Petition for rehearing by the panel is also denied,

March 16, 1990

Order Entered at the Direction of the Court:

/s/ Robert D. St. Vrain

Clerk, U.S. Court of Appeals, Eighth Circuit.

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